

Chapter 1: Getting There

Four boys, one girl, one owl, one toad, one snake, and an enormous amount of junk food, all crammed into one compartment of a train – it was quite possibly the perfect way to travel, Harry Potter thought contentedly.

He peered closely at a Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Bean. "This look like strawberry to you?" he asked the red-haired boy across the compartment from him.

"Could be," Ron Weasley said, looking at it. "But it could be cherry too."

"Or it could be tomato," Hermione Granger-Lupin chimed in. "It has that kind of orange look to it that the tomato one I had yesterday did."

"You had Bertie Bott's yesterday?" Draco Black looked hurt. "You didn't give me any."

"Why should I give you any, when you ate all my Ice Mice last week?"

"I didn't know they were yours – you left them sitting on the kitchen table!"

"Yes, for five minutes!"

"It still counts!"

"Do they always do this?" Neville Longbottom asked, watching Draco and Hermione squabble.

"It never lasts long," Harry said absently, still regarding his bean. "I might as well just try it and see..."

He nibbled the end off it carefully, and tasted an odd combination of salt, copper, iron...

"Blood-flavored," he said, spitting it back into his hand. "I guess they're going after the vampire market now."

“Yeah, if they can pick them out,” Ron said, holding up a green one. “What do you reckon – sour apple or grass?”

Draco had apologized to Hermione, who was looking slightly mollified. “Next time you see candy sitting out, ask around and see if it belongs to someone before you eat it,” she warned him.

“Because if Padfoot or Moony left it there, ten to one it’s hexed,” Harry said, swallowing a mouthful of Chocolate Frog.

“I know that – I’ve only lived with them for seven years.”

Neville frowned. “I thought you said nine years.”

“No, that’s me and Neenie,” Harry said.

“Don’t call me that,” Hermione snapped. “That’s a baby name, and we’re not babies any more. If you call me that when we get to Hogwarts, I’ll... I’ll...”

“Poke me with the pillows?” Harry suggested. “Or put me in the comfy chair?”

“No, she’ll tie you to the rack,” Draco said in a sepulchral voice. “And then she’ll give the rack a turn.”

“It’s some Muggle thing or other,” Ron said to the confused-looking Neville as the three cubs howled with laughter. “I don’t understand it, and if you try and get them to explain they just laugh harder. Just ignore it, they’ll stop eventually.”

“What is so funny, my eggling?” asked a voice from inside Harry’s shirt.

“Sorry, Siss. Human joke again. Doesn’t translate well.”

Neville jerked and stared at Harry. Harry wasn’t surprised. Hearing what sounded like a snake’s hissing coming from a human being must be a little strange if you weren’t expecting it.

“Neville, this is Siss,” he said, reaching into his shirt with his left hand and gently extracting the snake, who was coiled loosely around his right shoulder. “She’s a friend of mine.”

“You’re a Parselmouth,” Neville breathed, still staring.

Harry nodded. “I found out when I was four,” he said. “It was kind of an accident, and no one really knows why I can do it. Snakes tell good jokes sometimes, though. I met a snake once at the London Zoo who wanted to eat this fat boy who was in the reptile house.” Something stirred in his mind regarding that, but it refused to come up far enough for him to see it.

Neville smiled slightly. “Can I touch it?” he asked a little hesitantly.

“Can Neville pet you, Siss?”

The snake nodded. “She doesn’t mind,” Harry said, holding out his hand.

Neville stroked Siss’ head, tentatively at first, then a little more firmly as he felt the smooth, soft scales. “She’s kind of pretty,” he said. “I thought snakes were slimy.”

“A lot of people do, but they’re not.” Neville having finished, Harry lifted Siss above his head and felt her slither off his hand and onto the bars of Hedwig’s cage. Snake and owl had regarded each other warily for about a week after Harry had brought Siss home, but then had made friends. Hedwig hunted for them both now, since Siss had a much harder time getting outside to find her own food.

“So now you know about us,” Draco said, unwrapping another Cauldron Cake. “All about our family. And Ron’s.” The usual explanations about the Pack, and Ron’s rather simpler family background, had occupied the first few hours on the train. “What about you?”

“Well, my gran brought me up – you met her on the platform – and she’s a witch, obviously, but the family thought I was a Squib for

ages,” Neville said frankly. “My Great Uncle Algie used to try and make me show accidental magic – he pushed me off Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned – but nothing happened until I was eight. He was hanging me out an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go.”

Hermione gasped.

“I was fine,” Neville said quickly. “I bounced – all the way down the garden and into the road.”

Harry, Ron, and Draco laughed. Hermione bristled. “It’s not funny!”

“Yes, it is,” Neville said. He was laughing too. “You should have seen my face, I was so surprised – and everyone was really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And even more when I got my Hogwarts letter – everyone was worried I might not be magic enough to come. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me Trevor.” He patted his pocket, then froze. “He’s gone!”

“He can’t have gone far,” Ron said. “Come on, let’s look.”

But a search of the compartment turned up nothing. “He can’t have got out,” Draco said. “We haven’t had the door open at all...”

“Except when the lunch cart came around,” Hermione remembered unhappily.

“Oh no,” Neville said, looking distressed. “I have to go look for him. I’ll be back.” He hurried out the door.

Harry looked out the window at the rather wild-looking countryside and couldn’t resist grinning. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel bad for Neville, but somehow it was difficult to get upset about a missing toad when he had so much to look forward to. He’d be seeing Hagrid in a short while, and taking the boat ride across the lake, and then there was the start-of-term banquet, and somewhere along the way he’d find out what house he was in...

Harry frowned as he realized something. "Ron, do you know how we get put into houses? Moony and Padfoot and Letha wouldn't ever tell us."

"I think it's tradition to keep it a big secret," Ron said. "Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

"Padfoot would say stupid stuff," Draco recalled. "Like you have to make up a song on the spot about what house you want to be in, and if the teachers don't like it, they send you home. Moony and Letha would just smile and look all mysterious. And of course Danger doesn't know."

"She might," Hermione objected. "She shares Moony's memories, doesn't she?"

"Even if she did know, she wouldn't tell," Harry said gloomily. "Adult solidarity. It's not fair."

"Whatever it is, it can't hurt," Hermione said practically. "Parents would complain if their children got hurt on their first day at Hogwarts."

"Maybe it hurts so much no one ever dared tell about it," Ron said worriedly.

"For a thousand years?" Hermione scoffed. "No, it's probably something simple like a written exam."

"Only you would call a written exam 'simple', Neenie," Draco said, shaking his head.

Hermione grabbed Draco's collar and shoved her face very close to his. "Don't. Call. Me. That."

Draco swallowed. "All right. Fine. I'm sorry."

Hermione released him just as the door to the compartment slid open.

“Did you find –” Harry began, turning to the door. The question died on his lips.

The boy standing in the doorway was not Neville. He was rather small and skinny – a bit weedy-looking, really, Harry thought – and he was staring at Draco. “I remember you,” he said. “We met at Madam Malkin’s.”

“What about it?” Draco said, not quite challengingly.

“You didn’t tell me you were Draco Malfoy.”

“I’m not.”

“What do you mean you’re not?”

“My name’s Draco Black. And you are?”

“Theodore Nott.” The boy stuck out his hand. Draco took it warily and shook it.

“And you’re Harry Potter,” Nott said, extending his hand to Harry, who shook it also. “My father used to tell me stories about you. Both of you. But you more,” he said to Draco.

“Stories about us?” Draco looked at Harry, baffled. No one except the Pack had known anything about them until the previous December.

“I know he was making some of it up, but then I read in the newspaper – I had to come and ask – were you really raised by Mudbloods?”

Harry and Draco shot to their feet, Ron only an instant behind them. “Get out,” Harry said, his tone not quite a snarl.

Nott looked confused. “Why?”

“No one calls my family names,” Draco said, his face furious. “Get out.”

“Oh – you mean Mudblood?” Nott took an involuntary step back as Ron scowled at him. “But – everyone says that – all the really good families, anyway–”

Harry drew his wand. “Get out,” he said. “Or you’ll find out what Sirius Black taught me how to do.”

His godfather’s name still had power, even though the news of his innocence was several months old. Nott blanched and retreated to the door. “You won’t get away with this,” he said, half in anger, half in fear, staring at the wand in Harry’s hand. “My father’s rich – and powerful – he won’t let you do this.”

“We’re not doing anything,” Ron growled. “And we won’t, as long as you leave. Now.”

Nott glared at them all, even Hermione, who hadn’t come out from behind her book once during the whole episode, then left.

Everyone relaxed.

“What were you going to do?” Draco asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “I don’t really know any spells.”

“You could have turned his hair blue,” Hermione said. Her voice acquired a hint of snap. “It worked just fine on me.”

“He’s not my sister.”

“So change the words a little. It’s not that hard.”

The door opened again. Harry whirled toward it, wand ready.

Neville shrank back. “What did I do?”

“Sorry,” Harry said quickly, putting his wand away. “Did you find him?”

“He’s right here,” Neville said, showing them the squirming toad. “I don’t know why he keeps getting away like this – I try to keep track of him–”

“Do you have a cage for him, or a tank or something?” Draco asked.

“No, I forgot it at home. Maybe Gran’ll send it along by owl...” Neville furrowed his brow. “There was something I had to tell you, something important...”

“Are we slowing down?” Ron asked, looking out the window.

“We’re almost there!” Neville blurted. “That’s it, I found Trevor up at the front, and the conductor said we were almost there!”

“We should get changed, then,” Hermione said, closing her book. “We’ll have to take it in shifts, there isn’t enough room in here for all our trunks to be open at the same time...”

Harry and Draco went first, then Ron and Neville (Harry held Trevor for him), then Hermione. She had just closed her trunk when a voice echoed through the train. “We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes’ time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately.”

“Come on, Siss,” Harry said, holding up his arm for the snake. “We’re almost there.” His stomach lurched with excitement. Ron was pale under his freckles, Neville was sweating again, and Hermione was rubbing her lips with her knuckles, something she only did when she was worried or excited, in this case, probably both. Draco looked totally calm, but Harry knew his brother – if it suited him, Draco could look calm in the middle of a hurricane. He was probably just as nervous as everyone else.

“Relax, eggling,” Siss advised him. “You’ll hurt yourself if you’re so tense.”

“I’ll try,” Harry murmured.

They made their way out into the corridor, which was already fairly full and becoming more so. The train was slowing down more and more, and finally stopped with a jerk which would have tumbled Neville to the floor if there had been any room for him to fall. As it was, he cannoned into Harry and Ron fairly hard – Harry was sure he'd have a bruise tomorrow.

"Sorry," Neville muttered apologetically.

They joined the push to the door, which admitted them onto a tiny, dark platform with the smell of pine trees all about. Hermione shivered a bit in the chill air, and Harry bumped his shoulder gently into hers, making her smile wanly.

"Firs' years!" called the voice he'd been waiting for. "Firs' years over here!"

Neville gasped at the sight of the enormous man holding the lantern. "It's all right, that's Hagrid," Draco said. "He works here, we know him."

"All right there, you three?" Hagrid called, catching sight of the cubs. They grinned and waved at him. "Firs' years follow me – mind yer step, now!"

Ron almost tripped as they started along the steep, narrow path which Harry was sure led down to the lake. Neville had started to snifle. No one was saying anything.

"Hoy, watch it," Draco snapped as someone pushed past him, separating him from the other cubs.

"Keep yer eyes open, now," Hagrid called. "Soon as yeh come 'round this bend here, yeh'll be able ter see—"

Everyone gasped, even the cubs, who had been to Hogwarts before. They had certainly never seen it like this, Harry thought, admiring the view – the vast castle with all its towers, perched hawk-like on the cliff, every window brightly lit, reflected in the cold black lake before them...

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats lined up along the shore. Harry looked around for Draco and spotted him some distance away, being talked at by a girl with a rather squashed looking face. He was getting into a boat with her, although he didn't look happy about it...

"Come on, Harry!" Ron hissed, and Harry realized he was almost the last person not in a boat yet. He quickly got in and sat down beside Neville.

Hermione squealed with excitement as Hagrid roared out "FORWARD!" and the boats began to move. Harry watched the castle coming closer and closer, and wondered with a sudden shiver where he'd be sleeping that night... tower or dungeon...

"Heads down!" Hagrid called as they reached the cliff on which the castle was built. Everyone ducked as the boats passed through a curtain of ivy and down a tunnel to an underground harbor, where they climbed out onto a pebbly shore. Ron grabbed Trevor on the way out and handed him back to Neville.

They followed Hagrid up the rock passageway, onto the grassy lawn of the castle, and up the stone front steps. Draco had maneuvered his way back to them at some point, and the cubs pressed close to Hagrid as he raised his hand and knocked three times on the door. As his hand came down, it passed ever so casually across Hermione's head and Draco's shoulder, and a great finger stroked Harry's face. Harry knew it was Hagrid's way of saying "Good luck".

The door opened, and Professor McGonagall stood there, looking quite stern and forbidding. Harry bit down on his lip as he recalled one of her last visits to the Den, when Moony had cracked a joke that had made her laugh for almost thirty seconds straight.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall."

"Thank you, Hagrid. Students, follow me." McGonagall opened the door wider, and everyone crowded into the entrance hall. Harry was about to turn right and go into the Great Hall, but Ron grabbed his

arm and pulled him after McGonagall, who was leading them into a small chamber off the entrance hall.

“Thanks,” Harry whispered. He resolved to pay attention to what was going on. Just because I’ve been here before doesn’t mean I know everything.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall. Her eyes – or was it Harry’s imagination? – rested a moment longer on him and his brother and sister than on the other first years. “The start-of-term banquet will begin momentarily, but before you can take your seats in the Great Hall, you must be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is very important, for while you are here, your house will be like your family. The four houses are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin...”

Harry tuned her out in favor of looking around the room. He spotted Theodore Nott against the far wall, looking bored, and the boy Danger said was his cousin Dudley, pressed into a corner. He seemed exceedingly nervous and was listening desperately to McGonagall, as if hoping she would tell him it had all been a mistake and he could go home...

“I shall return when we are ready,” Professor McGonagall announced. “Please wait quietly.” She left the chamber. A hushed buzz of talk sprang up, mostly people asking their neighbors if they knew how the Sorting would happen. Harry swallowed.

“Whatever happens, it happens to all of us,” Hermione said, trying to sound brave and succeeding only in sounding brash, but Harry appreciated it anyway. “Pack together.”

“Pack forever,” Harry and Draco answered.

“The oath,” Ron said, in the tone of one grasping at straws. “The Pack-oath. Maybe that would help.”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Draco said, licking his lips nervously.

Harry reached for someone's hand and got Neville's. No reason he can't do it too. "Do what we do," he said. "It might help us."

Neville nodded, his face rather pale, and crammed Trevor into his pocket again. Hermione giggled a little shrilly, reached over to adjust Neville's cloak (which was fastened under his left ear), and ended up holding his other hand. Draco and Ron quickly fit themselves into the circle, and they began to recite.

"My hand in yours,

"My wand with yours,

"My life for yours,

"Now and always."

Neville picked it up quickly, and they had just time to say it the full three times together before someone screamed at the back of the room, making them all jump and turn to see what it was.

"Ghosts," Neville moaned quietly. "Why did it have to be ghosts?"

"What's wrong with ghosts?" Draco asked. "They don't hurt anything."

"They're scary," Neville said, looking at the pearly-white, luminescent figures with dread.

"Come along," said Professor McGonagall's voice from the doorway. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

"That's scarier," Ron said in a voice that was almost a whimper.

Falling into line behind Draco and in front of Ron, Harry followed Professor McGonagall out of the antechamber and into the Great Hall, where he shuddered as hundreds of faces all seemed to be looking directly at him. He looked up as he walked to see the enchanted ceiling, until he stepped on Draco's foot by accident.

"Ow," his brother hissed at him.

“Sorry,” Harry answered guiltily.

Professor McGonagall led them up between two of the house tables and around so that they had to face the other students. Just before Harry turned the corner, Dumbledore caught his eye and winked. Harry tried to smile back, but his heart wasn't in it.

Professor McGonagall set a four-legged stool in the center of the clear space in front of the first years, then placed a very shabby looking wizard's hat on top of it. The Hall went utterly silent.

Harry heard a squeal among the first years as the hat twitched – a rip near the brim opened wide, looking rather like a mouth, and the Hat began to sing:

Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can top them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

Harry relaxed all over. He should have known it wouldn't be anything bad – his Pack would never have let him go if the Sorting were going to be bad – and Dumbledore wouldn't make his students do anything that would hurt them...

The Hat had just finished delineating the defining characteristics of each house. It wound up its song:

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!

Harry laughed and applauded with everyone else as the Hat bowed to each of the four tables.

"I'm going to kill Fred," Ron muttered in his ear. "Wrestling a troll, my arse."

The Weasley twin in question – at least Harry thought it might be him – was sitting at the table farthest to the left, staring intently at Ron. So were Percy and the other twin. It struck Harry suddenly that if they were called in alphabetical order, as seemed likely, Ron would be going almost last...

"Abbott, Hannah!" Professor McGonagall read from her list.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the Hat after a moment on Hannah's head. The table on the other side of the hall from the Gryffindors cheered, and Hannah scurried towards it madly, finding a seat there just as the cheers died down.

"Black, Draco!"

Draco went white. Harry squeezed his shoulder, and he walked forward towards the stool a bit jerkily. There was whispering, Harry

noticed, and with a surge of anger he made out the word “Malfoy” in some of it...

Why do you care so much about that? Get over it. He’s a Black now. And he’s my brother. And that’s not going to change, no matter where he gets Sorted...

Harry’s stomach dropped as he had a horrible thought.

What if he gets put in Slytherin?

Oh no, please no, please not that...

Hermione seemed to have had the same thought – Harry could see her stricken face out of the corner of his eye. The Hat was taking much longer than it had with Hannah. The Hall was dead quiet. Twice, the rip on the brim of the Hat opened as if it were about to speak, then closed again. Then, finally, when the whispering had started again out of sheer annoyance, the Hat straightened up on Draco’s head –

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Hermione screamed with glee, Ron yelled, Harry stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled the way Padfoot had taught him. Draco whipped the Hat off and practically ran to the Gryffindor table, where Fred and George clapped him on the back. He sat down grinning almost literally from ear to ear.

The Sorting continued. “Dursley, Dudley!” Professor McGonagall read out, and Harry, with several years’ experience reading her expressions, could see distaste on her face – she obviously remembered the name of Dursley. The pudgy blond boy wobbled out from the crowd of first years and sat down shakily on the stool. It didn’t take quite as long as it had with Draco, but it was still a fairly uncomfortable wait before the Hat shouted “SLYTHERIN!”

“He’s a Muggleborn, isn’t he?” Ron whispered to Harry.

Harry nodded.

“He’s going to die,” Ron predicted. Harry agreed, seeing the looks of distaste on many Slytherin faces as Dudley joined their table and knowing, as he did, the reputation of Slytherin house as the purest of the pure.

“Granger-Lupin, Hermione!” came up in due course, and Hermione walked proudly to the stool and sat straight and tall as the Hat fell onto her head. Harry thought it might have been hearing her newly-doubled name that gave her the confidence.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry and Ron high-fived. Hermione ran straight into Draco’s hug, nearly knocking the blond boy backwards onto the table before Fred Weasley could catch him.

“Longbottom, Neville!”

“I’ll hold him,” Harry said, extending his hands for Trevor.

“But what if I don’t get into the same house as you?”

“Nothing says we can’t move around a little once we’ve been Sorted,” Harry said. “Go on, she’s waiting.” Professor McGonagall was not quite tapping her foot, but she was very obviously ready for Neville.

The hat took almost as long with Neville as it had with Draco. When it finally shouted “GRYFFINDOR!”, Neville ran to the table still wearing it, and didn’t realize until Hermione said something to him when he got there. He flushed and jogged back to return it to Professor McGonagall amid the laughter of the school, and detoured to pick up Trevor from Harry on his way back.

More students were sorted... “Nott, Theodore” became a “SLYTHERIN!”... a pair of identical twins, “Patil, Padma” (“RAVENCLAW!”) and “Patil, Parvati” (“GRYFFINDOR!”), and then...

“Potter, Harry!”

The whispering was more prevalent than it had been with Draco, and everyone seemed to be leaning forward to stare as Harry sat down. "Good luck," said Professor McGonagall out of the side of her mouth as she lowered the Hat onto his head, cutting off his view. He waited.

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Another difficult one, there seem to be a lot of them this year. Brave, yes, that you are, and quite bright as well... talent, oh yes, loads of it, with that interesting little sidelight of Parseltongue... and what's this, buried down deep – you want to be as good as your father was? I remember your father quite well, quite well indeed, and your mother too... so where shall I put you, then?"

Harry gulped. I'd like Gryffindor, but just please not Slytherin. Not Slytherin. Please. Anything but that.

"Anything? You're sure? That's a dangerous thing to promise, anything... you would do well in Slytherin, you know, and it would help you become truly great... no? Well, if you're sure, all right – GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry's heart leapt as Professor McGonagall pulled the Hat off his head. She looked down at him and gave him a very small wink. He grinned back and ran over to the Gryffindor table, where Hermione hugged him tightly and he and Draco performed the secret boy-cubs handshake that was theirs and theirs alone. Fred and George were chanting, "We got Potter, we got Potter!" and pounding on the table, ignoring Percy's look of displeasure.

"You are not tense now, eggling," Siss remarked.

"I've been put where I wanted to be," Harry answered in the quietest whisper he could manage. "Where my sire and dam were, and with my nest-mates."

"I am happy for you." He felt the smooth coils gently constrict once around his arm in the serpentine equivalent of a hug.

Hagrid gave Harry a thumbs up from the High Table – Harry returned it with a grin. Professor Grumpy (Harry snickered to himself at the

nickname he'd been strictly banned from using out-of-den) was staring into his goblet, looking as sour as usual. Next to him sat a nervous-looking young man in a large purple turban, and next to him was a very good-looking blond wizard in neatly tailored lavender robes and matching hat, who looked familiar somehow...

"Harry!" Hermione hissed, poking him. Harry looked around just in time to see a pale green Ron sit down on the stool. Harry crossed his fingers, but the Hat took only a second to shout "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry whistled again, releasing all his pent-up anxiety in the shrill, piercing sound.

We're all together. This is going to be great.

Ron staggered over to the Gryffindor table and fell onto the bench between Harry and Hermione. "Good show, Ron," Percy said solemnly from up the table.

Ron's older brother seemed to have decided that the best way to deal with his rat turning out to be the man who had betrayed Harry's parents was to pretend that Harry didn't exist. He was starting to come around, though – he'd asked Harry very primly for the salt at a picnic the Pack and the Weasleys had shared a week or so ago, and he'd remarked on the weather positively civilly two days ago.

Dumbledore rose and lifted his arms in a gesture of welcome, beaming at the entire school, though Harry was almost certain that the Gryffindor table was getting just a little more attention than the rest. "Welcome!" he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! I have a few words to say before we begin our banquet: Kumquat! Cobble! Fuchsia! Gape! Thank you, and enjoy your feast!"

Dumbledore sat down as the school applauded. Harry turned to Draco and grinned. "Pay up," he said.

"No fair," Draco grumbled as he reached into his pocket.

"Honestly, is there anything you two won't bet on?" Hermione asked from across Ron, who was still rather pale and confused-looking.

"I won't bet on there not being food here," Harry said. "Because here it is." He helped himself to roast chicken from the platter which had just appeared in front of him.

Dumbledore had asked for the cubs' help in composing his start-of-term speech – he had wanted each of them to come up with words which were fun to say. Harry and Draco had agreed that for every word Dumbledore used from one of them, the other one had to pay five Sickles. Harry had found both "cobble" and "gape", while Draco had contributed "fuchsia". "Kumquat" was Hermione's, but she didn't care to bet.

Food, as usual, broke through Ron's stupor, and he was soon devouring everything he could reach. It was understandable, since the feast was every bit as good as Harry had come to expect from the Hogwarts house-elves. He slipped a few morsels of chicken to Siss, who enjoyed her food cooked occasionally. Once everyone had reached the "toying with dessert" stage, Dumbledore rose to his feet again.

"A few start-of-term notices for everyone. Firstly, I would like to welcome a new addition to our staff – Adjunct Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Gilderoy Lockhart, who joins current Professor Quirinus Quirrell."

The wizard in lavender stood up and took several flamboyant bows to applause, especially loud, Harry noticed, from the girls in the room. Hermione was staring at the man, enraptured. Harry groaned inwardly. Oh joy. My sister's in love. He rubbed his forehead as Lockhart bowed exceptionally deeply in Hermione's direction. This is going to be a headache.

Dumbledore announced Quidditch tryouts, reminded everyone that the Forbidden Forest was forbidden ("Never stopped us before," George Weasley said), and concluded with something unexpected: "And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry exchanged a look with Draco. Investigate third-floor corridor had just gone to the top of their to-do list.

One semi-rousing rendition of the school song later (Draco muttered something to Hermione about remembering the words, and Harry wondered if his brother was thinking of composing an actual melody for the song), Percy Weasley led the Gryffindor first years out of the Great Hall. Harry made a mental note to get the Marauders' Map off Fred and George at some point in the near future and study a few basic routes – like how, basically, to get from the Great Hall to the Gryffindor dormitories... he knew it wouldn't always be the same, Hogwarts changed day to day, sometimes hour to hour, but a general idea of what was going on would be helpful...

Besides, the Map should help me more than it helps them. I'm the son of a Marauder...

"Non carborundum," Percy said to the portrait of a fat lady in pink. It swung forward, revealing the round hole in the wall Padfoot and Moony loved to reminisce about – mostly about all the times Wormtail had needed a boost to get through it. Neville was the one who needed a leg up tonight – Harry wasn't sure if that bothered him or not.

Harry already knew what he would find on the other side of the wall – a homey, round room full of soft armchairs and sofas and round wooden tables, mostly done in red and gold, with a large fireplace in one wall. It reminded him a lot of the Den, though he knew the cause and effect were really the other way around – since the Den was inhabited by Gryffindors, it made sense that it resembled the Gryffindor common room.

Harry and Draco hugged Hermione good night before she followed the other girls up their own staircase to bed, and Ron shook her hand.

"Going to be odd not sharing with—" Harry started, but was cut off first by an enormous yawn and then by Draco shaking his head.

"What?"

“Probably better to keep the ‘sharing-a-room-with-girls’ bit under wraps,” Draco muttered, barely moving his lips.

“Ah.” Harry understood what Draco was getting at – Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, the two “unknowns” among the Gryffindor boys, might well think it strange for boys and girls of his and his siblings’ age to share a room, as indeed Neville might. Ron was used to it, it was just another of the strange things the Pack did, but there was no telling how the others would react.

So, it won’t come up, they don’t have to know, everyone’s happy. Harry yawned hugely again as they climbed the stairs. Did our dorm have to be at the very top?

He pulled his pajamas out of his trunk. A slip of parchment fluttered to the floor. He picked it up and looked at it.

Thinking of you, Greeneyes. Much love, sleep well, and best of luck.

It was in Danger’s handwriting, and all four Pack-parents had signed it.

Harry looked over at Draco and smiled to see that his brother had one too. He was sure it was almost identical, differing probably only in saying “little fox”, and Hermione’s would say “Neenie”, or if Moony had written it, possibly “Kitten”...

He swallowed against an emotion threatening to rise inside him. No, I am not going to be homesick my first night here. I can be homesick tomorrow. Right now, I’m tired and I’m going to bed.

He dug a little farther down into his things and extracted his stuffed lion, which he tossed onto his bed. Draco did the same on the bed next to his. Ron was already in his pajamas and climbing into the four-poster on Harry’s other side.

“G’night,” Harry said as he finished buttoning his pajama top.

“G’night,” Draco answered from his bed, pulling his curtains shut.

“Good night, Siss.”

“Good night, Harry.” The snake slid out from his pajama sleeve and curled up on his pillow. “Sleep well, and dream of fat prey.”

Harry smiled and closed his eyes.

(A/N: And we're off! Please remember to review, I live for feedback, and give my Yahoo group (link on bio page) a visit! Just to let you know, I haven't decided yet if this story will stay almost entirely from Harry's POV (canon style) or if it will switch around... And happy LwD birthday, Remus Lupin!)

Chapter 2: Letters to Everyone

The house looked serene and peaceful. Nothing about it suggested that it had been the hideout of a notorious criminal and his “family” for three years. However, if one drew closer, hints of current strife within might be noticeable.

“Sirius, if you mean you think I’m an idiot, then just say so instead of doing your little writer word-dance all around it!”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot, I just think you’re wrong!”

“You wanted my opinion, I gave it to you, and now you’re telling me I’m wrong?”

“The foreshadowing makes the story stronger, not weaker!”

“But you’re giving everything away!”

“Only if people can figure it out, and so far, no one who’s read it has!”

“And that’s who, you, me, and Letha, who we both know never tries to figure things out ahead of time because she likes to be surprised?”

“Would you rather I put in a deus ex machina ending?”

“You practically have. Where the heck does this sudden long-lost cousin come from?”

“I’ve been hinting at her the whole way through!”

“Without ever really giving anyone a chance to figure it out!”

“First I’m telling too much, now I’m not telling enough? Make up your mind here, Danger!”

“All right, I’ll make up my mind. It stinks. It’s terrible. I think you should set fire to it and try something else. Maybe something with a plot, this time!”

A crash, as if a chair had been knocked to the floor. "DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW HARD I WORKED ON THIS?"

"OH, YOU MEAN YOU WORKED ON IT? IT SURE AS HELL DOESN'T READ LIKE YOU DID!"

"I'M NOT SITTING HERE AND PUTTING UP WITH THIS!"

"YOU'RE RIGHT, YOU'RE STANDING!"

"FINE! I'M NOT STANDING HERE AND PUTTING UP WITH THIS!"

"FINE!"

Two doors slammed below. From his vantage point at their bedroom window, Remus Lupin watched his fuming wife stomp out to her favorite sulking spot in the back yard of the Marauders' Den.

He smiled. I even love her when she's mad.

Particularly when she's not mad at me.

A small sound in the doorway of the room where he stood made him look around. Aletha Freeman-Black was regarding him with a wry smile. "I take it you heard."

"I think the whole neighborhood heard. We're lucky Danger didn't actually set the thing on fire."

"Why? You could have put it out again."

"Yes, but not in time to save Sirius' work. Which I'm sure is better than she thinks it is, but not quite as good as he'd like."

Aletha sighed. "I think we all miss the cubs."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "If this is what it's like when they've only been gone for a few hours, heaven help us for the next few months."

"Oh, things'll improve. I hope," she added under her breath.

"They had better," Remus said, looking out the window again. Danger's bushy hair was just visible behind a tree, all the colors in the yard a touch brighter than usual in the light of the setting sun. "Where did Sirius go, do you know?"

"He's probably in the living room. I should get to him before he starts destroying things."

"Want me to do it?"

"Oh, would you?" Aletha gave one of the smiles that tended to make one feel as if the room had just brightened. "Thank you – I'll go talk to Danger, and don't worry, I'll stay out of biting range."

"That would be helpful – Meghan hardly needs to come back from the Weasleys' to find her mother bleeding in the yard."

The Pack-siblings descended the stairs together. Aletha followed the hallway which paralleled the stairs, headed for the back yard, and Remus turned right and went into the living room.

As he had expected, Sirius was pacing around, somewhat red in the face and growling slightly at the sheaf of papers he held in his hand. Remus smiled to himself and instructed just one tiny corner of one sheet to burn.

Sirius stared as smoke curled up from under his hand. "What the—"

"You looked hot under the collar," Remus said, making Sirius jump and spin to face him.

"This isn't my collar." Sirius pointed to his hand.

"Maybe not, but the phrase is still applicable."

"You heard, then."

"As I told Letha, I think the whole neighborhood heard. Neither you nor Danger tend to keep your emotions hidden." Remus regarded

Sirius for a long moment. "Is there something wrong I should know about here, Padfoot?"

"No." Sirius tossed the papers onto a table and sighed. "No, nothing's wrong. I'm just... let-down-ing, I guess. If that's a word. The Den feels so empty without the cubs around."

Remus nodded. "Agreed."

Sirius ran a hand through his hair. "I keep expecting to see Harry come running down the stairs, or hear Draco practicing in his room, or find Hermione reading under the piano. With that, and what Danger said – I should apologize to her, I shouldn't have yelled, she was just trying to help, but I hate criticism, even if it is constructive."

"I think that makes it worse in some ways," Remus said thoughtfully, "because you know you're supposed to be grateful that the person cares enough to tell you what you're doing wrong, but it still makes you feel terrible, and then you feel guilty for feeling terrible."

Sirius chuckled. "Sounds about right."

"Mr. Moony would like to submit that human beings are strange creatures."

"Mr. Padfoot would tend to agree with Mr. Moony, while adding that Marauders are even stranger."

"Mr. Moony would like to ask if Mr. Padfoot is implying that Marauders aren't human."

"Mr. Padfoot would like to waive this question on the grounds that the truthful answer is likely to get his robes set on fire."

"Mr. Moony will permit such a waiver." Remus smiled wickedly. "This time."

Aletha smelled smoke as soon as she stepped out the door into the back yard. She walked very quietly back towards the tree where she knew Danger was sitting; as she got closer, she could see tiny flares of light coming from behind it.

She's probably setting leaves on fire or something.

It was "or something", but not by much – dried grass was Danger's fuel of choice at the moment. She was pulling up a handful of it, igniting it and watching it burn out in her palm, then pulling up another handful.

"Pretending it's Sirius' hair?" Aletha asked, timing it carefully so that Danger was between handfals – she could easily see how loss of control over fire could be disastrous, even for a second.

Danger didn't seem startled at all, looking up instead with a slightly tired-looking smile; she had probably heard Aletha coming. "More or less. More less every time. I shouldn't have said that to him. The story doesn't stink. It's just... not ready yet. He needs to do another rewrite. I don't know why I went off like that."

"You don't? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Aletha crossed her arms and regarded Danger skeptically.

"All right, no. I mean, I do know." Danger scowled at the ground in front of her. "You and Remus, you can always get the truth out of me. It's the first of September and the cubs are gone, and even though we've been waiting for this for years, it's just..."

Aletha sat down beside her friend. "Hard?" she offered.

"Yes!" Danger sniffled, once, then twice.

"Oh, don't do that," Aletha said hurriedly, blinking hard. "Don't, please, don't start me off again..."

"I'm not," Danger said in a choked-up voice. "It's just the smoke, it's making my eyes water..."

“Liar.”

“You got it.”

And then there were two crying women in the back yard of the Den.

“I’m going to miss them so much,” Aletha got out, her head on Danger’s shoulder. “I know they’re going to have a wonderful time, but I’m still going to miss them so much...”

“What are you complaining about?” Danger laughed weakly through her tears. “You’ve still got one...”

“She’s going to miss them too, you know.” Aletha sniffed hard. “What are we going to do with her next year, when Ginny and Luna go away?”

“I’m sure we’ll find something,” Danger said uncertainly. “We’ve got a whole year to think about it.”

Unfortunately, that set them both off again.

Dinner was rather subdued that night. Everyone was trying not to look at the three empty places at the table. Meghan wasn’t eating, just poking at her food and moving it around on her plate.

The loud crack in the working portion of the kitchen made Aletha jump, Danger yelp, Meghan squeak, and Sirius swear. Remus almost cracked his neck, he whipped around so fast. “Dobby! Don’t do that!”

“Dobby is sorry, sir,” the house-elf said apologetically, emerging from behind the counter so that everyone could see him. “But Professor Dumbledore sent Dobby to the Pack with a message, sir. The Pack’s cubs are all being Gryffindors.”

Meghan clapped her hands happily and Sirius wiped his brow exaggeratedly, making everyone laugh. “I was afraid Narcy would come back and haunt me if Draco ended up a Slytherin after all,” he said. “Or worse, Lily and James, if it had been Harry.”

“Oh, come on,” Danger said, chortling. “Harry Potter, Slytherin? Not in this universe.”

“And the Wheezy is being a Gryffindor too,” Dobby added.

“Thank you very much for the message, Dobby,” Aletha said, smiling at the house-elf. “I feel much better now. And we’ll pass that along.”

“You is welcome, ma’am.” Dobby bowed to the Pack and disappeared with another loud crack.

“The Wheezy?” Sirius asked.

“I assume that means Ron,” Aletha said. “Either that or the cubs have a new friend with asthma.”

Everyone laughed. The tension in the Den was starting to run out.

The Pack would survive this planned separation, as they had survived everything before it. It was what made them Pack. They survived.

That didn’t mean they had to like it.
Dear everyone,

We’re all Gryffindors! Draco and Ron have the beds either side of me so we can talk at night, and Neville’s just one down from Ron. The other boys in our dorm are Dean Thomas (he’s a Muggleborn) and Seamus Finnegan (half-blood). They seem all right so far.

Dumbledore said something funny last night at the feast – there’s a corridor on the third floor that’s off-limits to everyone. We checked it out this morning and heard something alive inside. But it doesn’t show up on the Map, so it’s not a person. Do you know anything about it?

Thanks for the note in my things. It made me feel... good, I guess. But I’m probably going to be homesick soon. I remembered this morning that I’ve never been away from the Pack overnight before. Well,

except for overnightriders at the Burrow, and that's different. I'm here for a couple months at least.

I'm going to stop writing now (before I cry) and give everyone else a chance.

Love from

Harry

Pretty much, what Harry said – thanks for the note, I'll be homesick soon, and all that. I forgot my lucky socks, though, could you send them back with Hedwig? Meghan knows where they are.

We met a very strange boy on the train – well, met isn't the right word – met again? He was the boy who was bothering me at Madam Malkin's – it turns out his name is Theodore Nott, and he wanted to know if I was really raised by Muggleborns. Only that wasn't the word he used. He seemed surprised when we got mad at him. Do pureblood families really say – the other thing – all the time?

Harry's cousin's a Slytherin. I'm kind of sorry for him – a Muggleborn in Slytherin – he's probably not going to have any friends at all. Should we try to be nice to him?

People keep pointing and whispering. More at Harry than at me, I think, but since we're right next to each other it's hard to tell. I think I'm going to get tired of it before they do.

Please write back soon.

Love from

Draco

Moony, did you HAVE to put my nickname on that note? Lavender Brown got a hold of it and she and Parvati Patil were mewing at me all night. It's them, me, and a kind of quiet girl named Colleen Lamb in the dorm – I thought five was the usual number, but maybe there are only four girls because there are six boys in our year.

We were all scared out of our minds while Draco was getting Sorted – the Hat took longer with him than with anyone, I think, but it might have been Harry, they were very close. Ron only took a couple seconds. I don't know how long mine took, I was too busy trying not to faint.

We've just got our schedules – we don't have Potions until Friday, but it's a double period, and we have it with the Slytherins. Fred and George say Professor Grumpy (no, we didn't call him that, they used his real name, but I don't want to, and he'll never see this) always favors his own house. Is there anything we should or shouldn't do in his class?

I just realized my part of the letter's longer than anyone else's, so I'll stop now. I love everyone, especially you, Pearl. Maybe you can come for an overnight visit sometime and sleep in my bed. It's got big red velvet curtains all around it so we can shut the whole world out and tell secrets.

Much love from

Hermione
Dear Luna,

We've arrived safely and all been sorted into Gryffindor. We don't have Professor Snape until Friday, but we have him for a double period then. I'm not looking forward to it.

I hope you're well, and your father. Please give him my best.

Draco
Dear Ginny,

The train didn't crash, the boats didn't sink, and I got sorted into Gryffindor – and no, I won't tell you how the Sorting happens. You'll have to wait until next year. But don't believe Fred, it doesn't hurt. Harry and Draco and Hermione are all Gryffindors too.

We met this stringy-looking boy on the train who walked into our compartment and asked Draco straight out if it was true he'd been raised by Muggleborns. Only he was a bit ruder about it. I wanted to punch him on the nose – Harry actually pulled his wand on him. His name's Nott, Theodore Nott – would you mind asking Dad if there was anyone named Nott who ran around with You-Know-Who?

The food's wonderful, almost as good as Mum's cooking. We haven't had any classes yet, but we start right after breakfast. Hermione's all excited – a bit annoying, really – but at least we've got her to shut up about memorizing the textbooks. Wish me luck.

Ron
Dear Father,

I am well, and have been Sorted into Slytherin house. However, I am somewhat worried about my continued well-being. I met three boys on the train who threatened me after I asked them a question. Is the term "Mudblood" considered rude in some circles? And is there any way I could be ensured of my safety while I am here?

Please convey my best wishes to Mother.

Theodore
Dear Mum,

I'm here and it's scary. I had to try on a hat and it talked and said I was ambishous. Now I have to sleep in a dungeon and have a green snake on my robes and the other boys are rude. They call me mud blood. I don't know what that means. But I still want to learn magic. Please write back soon.

Dudley
(in Danger's handwriting)

Dear cubs,

We're so proud of you. Gryffindor forever!

Harry, and all of you – please stay away from that corridor on the third floor. You three don't need to go looking for trouble – trouble will probably come and find you. Do everyone a favor and don't give it any invitations.

Watch out for the Nott boy – his father was a Death Eater back in the day, and probably one of the highest-ranked still out of Azkaban. Don't make more enemies than you have to, though, so yes, be nice to Dudley if at all possible. And yes, Draco, purebloods do say – that – quite a lot of the time. They think it's funny. (Your socks are enclosed.)

Hermione, you're not even to use that name in writing. You would be amazed what Severus Snape can get his hands on. And he does not need any more reason to hate you than he already has. As for behavior in his class – don't antagonize him. (Unless you absolutely must, in which case, do it with some style.)

Homesickness is normal, but remember, you have each other. And our love for you doesn't change just because we're apart. Study hard and learn well, and we'll see you at Christmas if not before – it's always possible we'll decide to pop in for a flying visit. Meghan says to tell you that she already misses you a lot.

Oh yes, and stay out of the Forbidden Forest.

Love from

Danger

Moony

Padfoot

Letha

Pearl

P.S. I got a note from Tonks today – that's our cousin Dora Tonks, Charlie Weasley's lady-friend – which I'm enclosing. Let me know if she's right.

Padfoot
Dear Neville,

I should probably tell you a little about myself, since we don't know each other very well yet, so here goes. My full name's Meghan Lily Black (I was partly named after Harry's mum), and I was born on 1 June, 1983. I love dancing, music, and gardening, and I hate math and spelling.

When I grow up, I think I want to be a professional dancer. My Aunt Amy was one for a little while before she got her job at the bank. I'd have to go to a Muggle dance school for a while after I got out of Hogwarts, but it would be worth it.

What about you? What do you like and not like? And what do you want to be when you grow up? Please write back soon!

Meghan
Dear Ron,

Rub it in, why don't you. I hope Hermione does better than you in everything and drives you mad.

Dad says Patroclus Nott was a Death Eater for sure, but he claimed he'd been under Imperius and got away with it. He says be careful and don't hit anybody unless there aren't any teachers looking.

I want to know all about everything. What are the classes like? What are you learning? What do you do for fun? Please write back soon.

Ginny

P.S. How are the others?
Dear Draco,

I'm glad to hear you were Sorted into Gryffindor. I hope Professor Snape is not too rude to you. I've enclosed a copy of some music I like. If you can learn your part, we can try it together when you're home at Christmas. Meghan and Ginny and I are having a lot of fun together, but I still miss you.

Please write back soon.

Luna
Dear Theodore,

I hope you have befriended Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, your fellow Slytherin first years. If not, do so immediately. You will find them amenable. With them beside you, none will dare to challenge you.

Would you care to inform me of the names of those who threatened you, so that I may lodge complaints against them, or would you prefer this to remain secret? I shall abide by your will in this matter.

The term "Mudblood" is only considered rude by the uncultured.

With best wishes for a good term,

Father

As Harry had predicted, his homesickness started getting to him through the first week. He almost cried in Herbology, because their first lesson was about Muggle plants with magical properties, and quite a lot of the plants on the list Professor Sprout gave them grew in Letha's garden at the Den. Ron had to joggle his elbow twice in Charms because he'd started thinking about what he'd be doing at home at this time of day. And Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration demonstration snapped him back to the first time he'd ever seen her do magic – he'd been five and watching her from the shelter of Padfoot's arms...

He'd been looking forward to Defense Against the Dark Arts, but when Professor Lockhart ostentatiously swept into the classroom and

gave them an 80-question pretest all about himself, which took the better part of the class to complete, most of his hopes tumbled. The rest went when Lockhart informed them that he'd be taking most of their classes to let Professor Quirrell concentrate on the upper years, who needed to prepare for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s. His promise to bring something interesting for them to observe next class was met with barely stifled groans.

"Probably a picture of him," Dean Thomas said in annoyance as they left the classroom. "That's all he's interested in."

It did not escape Harry's notice that Hermione alone out of all the class had scored a perfect on the pretest, but Defense was held on Thursday, which was the day his homesickness peaked, and he was too miserable even to want to tease her about it. She and Draco weren't much better, though it didn't help, of course, that all of them were having trouble sleeping.

"I think I hate Astronomy," said Harry wearily that evening, smothering a yawn behind his hand. On an ordinary occasion, he would have been thrilled to stay up until midnight, but the fun in it was diminished when he had to pay attention to Professor Sinistra's lecture and try to figure out how to work his telescope at the same time.

"I think I hate Transfiguration," Draco answered, slumped in an armchair. "Not McGonagall, mind, just the class..."

Ron nodded, his head supported on his hand. "Did you see all that homework? We'll be lucky to finish that by next weekend."

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic," said Hermione testily. "If you want to complain, wait until tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?" asked Ron.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins," said Hermione promptly.

Ron groaned. "I forgot about that."

Harry sat up a little straighter. "Did we show him?" he asked Draco, who looked blank for a second, then brightened and shook his head. "Who's got it?"

"I think I do." Hermione began digging through her bag. "No... no... ah, here it is." She pulled out a creased piece of parchment and handed it to Ron. "Read that," she instructed him.

Ron read, and his eyebrows went up several inches. "He does?"

"We'll find out tomorrow," said Draco with a shadow of his usual grin. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," Snape said in the dungeon the next morning, pacing around the front of the classroom. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses..."

Snape gave the class a searching look. "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death – if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Hermione gave the boys a thumbs up. Word for word, she mouthed.

Ron coughed slightly, but Draco kept a firm hold on himself. He was not going to laugh in front of Snape, however tempting it was now that he knew (courtesy of his wonderful cousin Dora) that Snape used exactly the same speech with every year's class.

"Potter!" Snape focused suddenly on Harry. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Draco groaned inwardly. Damn it, that sounds familiar, but I can't think of it... and if I don't know it, there's no way Harry's going to, he doesn't like brewing potions...

Hermione's hand was up like a rocket. Ron looked totally blank. Harry was keeping his face polite. "I don't know, sir," he said.

Snape sneered. "Clearly fame isn't everything. Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

I know this – Letha told us about these ages ago! Draco added his hand to Hermione's, but Snape ignored them both – he seemed determined to make Harry look bad in front of the class.

"I don't know, sir," Harry repeated.

The Slytherins were all laughing behind their hands – Draco frowned. No, not quite all. One boy, whose name Draco couldn't recall, was watching the interchange intensely, with no trace of humor on his Mediterranean features. But Nott, Dursley, and Nott's two enormous shadows Crabbe and Goyle were all convulsed with silent laughter, as were the Slytherin girls, who ranged from the hulking Millicent Bulstrode to a wispy-looking girl with a very proud face who Draco thought might be named Artemis Moon.

A thought shot across his mind before he could stop it.

I miss Luna...

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?" Snape was saying as Draco brought his attention back to the front of the class.

Draco bit his lip. Come on, Harry, I know you know this one!

Harry's eyes had never left Snape's. "There is no difference, sir," he said quietly. "They're two words for the same thing."

Draco and Hermione both lowered their hands and flashed each other the Marauder victory signal under the table.

"Correct," Snape said coldly. His eyes went to Draco and Hermione. "Five points from Gryffindor for disrespect to a teacher, Black, Granger-Lupin."

He can't possibly have seen that...

“Raising your hand when the question is directed at another student is incorrect and will not be allowed.”

Oh.

“For your information,” Snape continued, returning his glare to Harry, “asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. And monkshood and wolfsbane are the plant also known as aconite.” He looked around the room. “Well? Why aren’t you all copying that down?”

About thirty minutes of notes later, Snape instructed them to put away their parchment and take out their cauldrons. “The practical lesson for today is very simple,” he said, waving his wand at the board, which was immediately covered with directions. “A potion to cure boils. Any supplies you do not have with you should be found in the stores cupboard.” The door sprang open at another wave of his wand. “You will work in pairs. I shall allow you to choose your own partners today; however, if that ends in disaster, I shall hereafter assign you partners.” Snape’s tone suggested he rather expected disaster to occur. “Follow the directions exactly. You have until the end of class. Begin.”

Harry and Ron leaned back to Draco and Hermione. “Can we swap partners?” said Harry, glancing over his shoulder at the board. “You’re both good, and we’re both...”

“Not,” Ron said frankly.

“Fine with me,” said Hermione, picking up her bag and cauldron. “Draco?”

“Ronald Weasley, come on back,” Draco said in his announcer voice, but quietly – Snape was on the other side of the classroom, but that could change at any moment.

Ron snorted slightly as he and Hermione swapped places. “Is that from some Muggle thing again?”

“You could say that. All right, let’s see what we have and what we need to get from the cupboard...”

“Just tell me what to do,” said Ron. “And use small words.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “How come?”

“I’m hopeless at Potions. Mum tried to teach me a little a couple times, and I could never get anywhere.”

Draco frowned, remembering a similar situation about a year ago with Meghan, when she had claimed she was hopeless at mathematics and would never get any better...

Maybe what worked then will work now.

“Ron, can you read?”

Ron looked at him oddly. “Of course I can read.”

“Read the first line, then.” Draco pointed at the board.

“Combine two ounces chopped dried nettles with three crushed snake fangs,” Ron read aloud.

“Can you do that?”

“I can do that, but...”

“Not but. Just, can you do that?”

“Anyone could do that.”

“Prove it.”

Ron gave Draco a dirty look, then opened his bag. “Here, snake fangs,” he said, pulling out a vial. “And mortar and pestle for crushing them. But I haven’t got nettles – so they should be in the cupboard...”

“I’ll get them,” said Draco quickly, already moving before Ron could say anything.

He can’t be the ingredient hander forever, he needs to be able to do this on his own – sooner or later he’s going to get paired with a Slytherin or with Neville or somebody, and we won’t be able to help him – so he needs to know he can do this.

Draco returned with the nettles and a few other things he knew they’d need. Ron was crushing the snake fangs under Snape’s watchful eye.

“Finer,” the Potions Master said critically. “They must be powder-fine if they are to combine correctly with the other ingredients, Weasley.” His eyes moved to Draco and narrowed in distaste, but he said nothing, merely sweeping forward to criticize the way Hermione was handling her scale.

Ron and Draco moved forward through the potion, Draco having Ron read each line aloud, then do what it said. By the time their potion was actually boiling in the cauldron, Ron was smiling a little. “I’m not so bad,” he said happily, pulling the cauldron off the fire with a magical potholder and adding the porcupine quills Draco had broken up.

“Just remember to take it one step at a time,” Draco advised, when a shout rang out.

“Neville, no!”

Neville froze, his hand above Seamus’ bubbling cauldron.

Hermione ran from the stores cupboard to Neville’s side and guided his hand away from the cauldron. “Read the top line on the right half of the board,” she said. “Carefully.”

“Add seven porcupine quills, broken into half-inch lengths...” Neville read. “But I was doing that!”

Hermione shook her head. “Keep going.”

"After..." Neville looked back at the cauldron and flushed. "Oh."

"Exactly." Hermione picked up Neville's potholder and handed it to him. "After taking the cauldron off the fire."

"Well done, Miss Granger-Lupin," said Snape sarcastically, seeming to appear from nowhere. "Five points from Gryffindor for interfering with a fellow student's work."

Hermione stared up at him. "But—"

Harry caught her eye and shook his head firmly.

"Return to your seat, Miss Granger-Lupin."

Draco wondered if it was his imagination that put such a sarcastic spin on the latter half of Hermione's name.

It's Snape... probably not.

"What do you think would've happened if Neville'd added the quills?" asked Ron, pouring out a measure of pine needles, as a furious-looking Hermione returned to her place beside Harry.

Draco stirred their potion, trying to remember. "I think... that would turn it into a boil inducer, and a really strong acid. It might even have melted through the cauldron..."

"Entirely correct, Black. Now less talk and more work, or shall I make it fifteen points from Gryffindor for this lesson?"

Ron concentrated on his pine needles and Draco on his stirring until Snape had stalked away. "How'd you know that?" Ron asked, barely moving his lips.

"Letha likes potions. She taught us some."

"Is that how Harry knew about monkshood and what's-it-called?"

“Wolfsbane. Yeah.” Surreptitiously, Draco crossed his fingers under the table.

There were some things it was better that Ron didn't know.

(A/N: Ah, the reviews, and everyone wants something different – so you know what? I'm just going to write it the way I want to write it, and all of you can just... read it! Not to say I won't consider your ideas, but (holds up sign) “Don't Pester the Author”. Responses will be on Yahoo group eventually – hugs to everyone!)

Chapter 3: What You Deserve

The weekend was sunny and fair, which Harry thought was decidedly cruel of the universe. Why did it have to be so nice outside while he was stuck indoors doing homework?

“If you wouldn’t dawdle so much over it, it wouldn’t take you so long,” said Hermione. “Honestly, Harry, you’re worse than Meghan.”

He got more sympathy from Draco and Ron, both of whom also itched to be outdoors in the gorgeous weather, and both of whom were having similar difficulties with McGonagall’s homework.

“I just don’t get Transfiguration,” said Draco with a frustrated sigh.

“We’ve only had the one lesson, Draco, give it a chance,” said Hermione practically. “You might like it by next month.”

“I don’t want to give it a chance. It’s annoying, and it doesn’t make sense. Give me Potions any day. It’s straightforward – you follow the steps, you get the right result – and you get the same result every time. This kind of thing–” Draco tapped his Transfiguration notes. “– goes seven directions at once. I don’t like it.”

“Like it or not, we still have to do it,” said Harry, dipping his quill. “Come on, if we keep working we might be done by dinner.”

With Hermione’s help, the boys had indeed finished their essays by dinnertime, although Harry suspected Ron of writing large on purpose to fill up parchment space (Hogwarts essays were measured in feet and inches rather than pages, since they were written on scrolls). However, he wasn’t about to call his friend on it; he had no wish to spark a quarrel and make himself miserable again, now that some of his homesickness was finally going away.

Sunday was glorious. Free for the moment from the looming shadow of schoolwork, the cubs played outdoors all day, chasing one another and laughing, pestering Hagrid until he threatened to cook them for dinner. When they returned to the Gryffindor common room after eating their own dinner, a new notice had been put up on the board.

“Flying lessons?” said Ron incredulously, reading it. “Who doesn’t know how to fly?”

“Muggleborns,” said Hermione crisply. “They would have thought it was ridiculous to fly on a broomstick before they learned about the wizarding world and Hogwarts.”

“Wonder if we can test out of the class?” said Draco quickly, cutting off whatever Ron was about to say. “You ought to get out of it, Harry, you don’t need any help flying. You can do things not even Padfoot can manage.”

Harry smiled, accepting the compliment. For the first time, his godfather’s name didn’t evoke a horrid tightness in his chest.

Maybe I am getting used to being here.

He looked at the bottom of the notice and made a face. “You missed a part, Ron,” he said, pointing to the line he’d spotted. “Look who we have them with.”

“Madam Hooch, who else?” asked Draco.

“No, I mean what other house.”

“Oh no,” said Hermione unhappily. “Not—”

“Slytherin,” grumbled Ron. “Just what we need. They’ll probably try and hex the brooms or something.”

“Brooms?” asked Neville, who had just come down from the boys’ dorm. “What about brooms?”

“We’re starting flying lessons on Thursday,” said Harry.

“Flying?” Neville paled a little. “I’ve never been on a broom before. Gran would never let me.”

“Don’t worry, Neville, you’ll do fine,” said Hermione soothingly. “Just don’t panic.”

Harry thought his sister was being a bit optimistic. Neville had more accidents than anyone Harry had ever met, even with both his feet on the floor – Harry didn’t like to think about that much disaster-proneness, sitting on what amounted to a large javelin, ten feet off the ground and able to move freely. But Neville smiled and looked relieved, and Harry wasn’t about to burst his bubble.

The week passed much as the last one had. The lessons were different, of course, and the homework was just a bit more difficult, but Harry felt he was starting to get the hang of things. He now knew to listen extra-carefully to Professor Flitwick, who tended to become nearly inaudibly squeaky when excited, and he gave up on trying to listen to Professor Binns, the ghostly History of Magic teacher, opting instead to study from Hermione’s utterly precise notes.

Defense on Thursday morning was interesting, as Professor Lockhart had promised, but not in the way Harry had hoped.

“Everyone, take out your copies of Year with the Yeti,” instructed Lockhart, “and turn to page 126. Here you see a picture of me, in valiant battle with the abominable snowman of the Himalayas.”

Ron slid down in his chair to conceal the fact that he was trying not to laugh. The Lockhart in the drawing had muscles about three times the size of the man in front of them, and was standing triumphantly atop the rather wimpy-looking white furred creature which Harry supposed was the yeti. However ridiculous the picture might be, though, it was still easier to look at than Hermione’s expression of googly-eyed fondness as she listened raptly to Lockhart.

“However, this mere artist’s rendering cannot possibly give you the sense of my ferocious struggle with the creature. Nor, in truth, can the written word portray it. Such a fight must be seen, must be experienced, to be believed.” Lockhart bent down behind his desk and picked up what appeared to be a bundle of white cloth. “Mr. Potter, would you come up to the front of the class, please?”

Harry got up and walked forward, feeling a sense of impending doom, though he couldn't articulate why.

Lockhart beamed at him. "It's your lucky day, Harry. You get to demonstrate for your classmates the exact methods and procedures I used to defeat the Yeti of Tibul Bankur. Go on, robes off, and then get dressed quickly, so we'll have time to get through them all."

Harry accepted the bundle which Lockhart shoved at him. Up close, he could see that it was not just a bundle, but a suit – a white fur suit, such as a Muggle might wear to a costume party.

"You can change in my office if you're shy," said Lockhart brightly. "Don't keep us waiting too long, though, learning waits for no man... or yeti..."

He chuckled at his own joke. No one else did.

"You did well, mate," said Ron to the fuming Harry as they left the classroom. Harry glared at him, and he flushed. "I mean, as well as you could... I mean..."

"Ron," said Hermione. "Shut up."

"Flying this afternoon," said Draco as if to himself. "Be nice to be on a broom again."

Harry thought about flying, about the glorious freedom he felt when he was airborne, and some of the annoyance and embarrassment inside him ebbed away.

"Fred and George say the school brooms are awful, though," said Ron. "Some of them pull to the left or shake if you go too high, and George swears he got one once that kept rolling over when he tried to climb any faster than a crawl. He finally gave up and flew around on it upside-down all lesson – he almost passed out when he got off."

Everyone laughed, and Harry felt somewhat better.

The flying lesson was scheduled for three-thirty, on the opposite side of the grounds from the Forbidden Forest. The Slytherins were there

already when the Gryffindors arrived, spaced out oddly among the twenty broomsticks laid out on the ground. Harry suspected they'd had a look at them and picked out the best ones for themselves.

A shadow fell across Harry. He looked up.

Madam Hooch was circling above them, coming in for a landing. "What are you waiting for?" she barked even before she'd touched down. "Everyone stand by a broomstick, on the left. Come on, hurry up."

Harry picked the closest one and glanced down at it. It looked rather old, and some of the twigs were sticking out at odd angles – with a rush of longing he thought of his own sleek Nimbus One Thousand, in the broom closet at the Den.

"Right hand out over the broom," called Madam Hooch. "Now, all together – 'Up!'"

"UP!" shouted twenty voices.

Harry's broom, as he had expected, jumped right into his hand. Hermione took two tries, and Neville eventually had to bend down and pick his up.

"Pathetic, Longbottom," sneered Theodore Nott from the row in front of Neville. "Even Dursley can do better than that. Right, Dursley?"

Dudley Dursley looked surprised to be noticed, but nodded.

"Show him," Nott ordered. "Make your broom come to you."

"All right. Watch this, Longbottom." Dudley held his hand out over his broom. "Up, broom! Up!"

The broom made a little half-hearted leap off the ground, then fell back. Harry wasn't surprised – Dudley looked rather skeptical that the broom would respond to him, and of course that meant it wouldn't, Harry knew. You could say magic words and wave your wand all you

wanted, but unless you actually wanted something to happen, it wouldn't.

"Oh, come on, Dursley," snapped Nott. "You really have to mean it. Like this." He dropped his broom to the ground. "Up," he said sharply, and the broom rocketed upward into his hand. "See? Of course you'll take a little longer to get it, you're Muggleborn, but you can still beat Longbottom – pathetic excuse for a pureblood."

Neville blushed and turned away. Harry was about to say something he'd probably regret, but Madam Hooch had been working her way around the class showing them how to mount the brooms and now arrived at him, and he didn't have a chance.

After a little more technical instruction, Madam Hooch stood in front of the class, all of whom were mounted and waiting. "When I blow my whistle, kick off from the ground hard," she said.

"You'll never do it, Longbottom," hissed Nott.

"Rise a few feet, holding your brooms steady, then lean forward slightly to come straight back down."

"You'll be stuck on the ground all your life."

"On the whistle—"

"You're pathetic."

"Three—"

"Baby."

"Two—"

"Squib."

Neville lost control of himself and shoved off hard. He shot skyward, making a few of the girls squeal.

“Come back, boy!” shouted Madam Hooch, but Neville was obviously not able to manage his broom – Hermione had both hands clapped over her mouth as he rose higher and higher – he was about twenty feet up now – forty – sixty – Harry saw his face, white and scared, staring downwards –

Without making a truly conscious decision, Harry was astride his own broom and kicking off. “Potter!” he heard Madam Hooch yell, as if in a dream. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Harry thought it should be rather obvious what he was doing – he was saving Neville. He shot upwards as fast as he could and made it just in time to grab Neville’s wrist as the other boy lost his balance and nearly slipped off his broom. The unexpected weight almost unbalanced Harry as well, but he managed to hold Neville on – he didn’t know how long he would be able to stay on his broom –

Madam Hooch was suddenly alongside them, steadying Neville from the other side. “Good work, Potter,” she said, giving him an appraising look with her hawk-like yellow eyes. “Don’t do it again or you’ll be expelled. Let’s get you back to the ground, Longbottom.”

Neville nodded and grabbed hold of his broom. Then he looked down, and Harry saw his eyes widen and his face pale. Almost without warning, his eyes rolled back and he slumped over. Madam Hooch grabbed him as he canted alarmingly to one side. “Afraid of heights,” she said with a note of disgust in her voice.

Something glittering fell from Neville’s pocket. Harry saw it, and time seemed to slow.

Neville’s gran sent him that, I can’t let it get broken...

Harry dived, racing the glass ball towards the ground, almost instinctively aware of how fast he was going (very) and how close to the ground he was getting (closer every second) – there were girls shrieking somewhere nearby, but he tuned the sound out as distracting – he made the grab just in time to pull his broom’s front end up before it contacted the ground with disastrous results, and he

planted his feet triumphantly on the grass, the Remembrall safe in his hand, hearing the class start to cheer –

“HARRY POTTER!”

He jumped and turned around, still mounted on his broom. That tone of voice could belong to only one person.

Professor McGonagall was almost running – no, not almost, she was running without a doubt – toward them. Harry had never seen her run before. He swallowed against a feeling of panic.

I wanted to go home, but not like this...

“Come with me,” she said when she had reached them. Her face was stony, and she nodded brusquely to Madam Hooch, who was just bringing her broom in for a landing, the unconscious Neville in her arms. Harry quickly handed Hermione the Remembrall and followed Professor McGonagall toward the castle.

I wonder how much trouble I’m in. Probably a lot. I might not get expelled, but I’ll probably lose points for Gryffindor and get a lot of detentions... lines, or cleaning out her office, or extra homework or something... and she’ll write to the Pack, and I’ll have to sit through one of Moony’s lectures on not being reckless and following instructions...

Harry winced. That’d almost be worse than a month of detentions.

They were inside, climbing the marble stairs, and Professor McGonagall still hadn’t said anything to him. They were heading for the Charms classroom, Harry thought, and wondered wildly for a moment if she was going to have Flitwick hex him so he couldn’t get near a broom – but no, if she was going to do something like that, she would do it herself...

“Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?”

“Of course,” squeaked Professor Flitwick’s voice. “Go on, Wood.”

Wood, a rather burly fifth-year boy, came out of the classroom looking somewhat confused. "This way," said Professor McGonagall curtly, and set off again.

Wood?

As in the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team?

Harry snuck a look at Wood. He knew the older boy played Keeper, and he was built for it – long arms and strong shoulders...

He looked away quickly as Wood's eyes flicked towards him. He's probably doing the "famous Harry Potter" bit right about now. I really wish people wouldn't do that...

Professor McGonagall turned into an empty classroom and peremptorily ordered Peeves, the castle's resident poltergeist, out. Harry ducked as the mischievous spirit passed close over his head, and a wave of Professor McGonagall's wand closed the door behind him.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood," she said. "Wood – meet your new Seeker."

Wood's face lit up. "Professor – really?"

"Oh, yes," said Professor McGonagall with a definite nod. "His family told me how good he was on a broom, but I quite honestly didn't believe them until I saw what he did just now."

Harry stared at her. Of all the possibilities of what could happen to him, this was one he hadn't considered. "But, Professor—"

"I know, Potter, first years are not allowed their own broomsticks. We shall find a way around that. Talent such as yours should not be allowed to go to waste. He caught a thing about the size of a Snitch with his bare hand after a fifty-foot dive," she told Wood, who looked as if he'd like to ask someone to pinch him, except that he didn't want to wake up. "Exactly what we need – I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks after that last match with Slytherin, why Weasley

had to go and get himself injured in the entrance test for that dragon preserve I'll never know..."

"You're just the build for a Seeker, too," Wood told him, looking him over. "Nothing against Charlie Weasley, of course, he was wonderful, but he was just a bit bigger than I like in a Seeker – you'll be excellent, Potter, light and speedy, perfect for Snitch-catching..."

Fireworks seemed to be going off in Harry's head. It was all he could do to keep from grinning like an idiot.

"I shall be contacting your family to arrange for you to have access to a broom, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, getting Harry's attention again. She smiled slightly. "Your reprobate of a godfather now owes me a favor."

Harry wanted very much to laugh at this description of Sirius, but wasn't sure if it was the best of ideas in front of his Head of House.

"You are, of course, excused from flying lessons from now on," Professor McGonagall went on, "and I want to see you training quite hard, or I may change my mind about punishing you." Her smile grew reminiscent. "Your father would have been proud of you today. And your mother would likely have been annoyed with you."

"You disobeyed an elder, and for this you are rewarded?" asked Siss. "Egging, it strikes me that your people do not make much sense at times."

Harry laughed. "I can deal with a little 'not-making-sense' if it means I get to play Quidditch."

"Yes, I can hear the happiness in your voice. Will you take me with you when you fly? I have always wondered what it would be like to soar as the birds do."

"As soon as I get my broom, it's a date." Harry sat up on his bed at the sound of pounding feet.

The door of the first year boys' dorm flew open, and Ron, Hermione, and Draco pelted in.

“Harry, are you all right?”

“That was awesome, mate!”

“Were you expelled?”

“How many detentions do you have?”

“Is she writing to the Pack?”

“What happened?” finished Hermione in a sudden silence. “You look... happy.”

“Is anyone else around?” asked Harry, looking behind them.

“No, everyone else went to dinner,” said Draco. “Come on, Harry, spill.”

“You’re not allowed to tell anyone,” Harry warned them. “It’s a secret until November sometime.”

“Stop playing with us and just tell us already!” Ron exploded.

“I’m the new Seeker for Gryffindor.”

Silence reigned.

And I wish I had a camera. Hermione, Draco, and Ron were standing side by side, all wearing exactly the same expression of open-mouthed disbelief.

“They look like baby birds waiting for their mother to return with a worm,” Siss commented from her usual place on Harry’s shoulder.

“Seeker?” said Ron finally in tones of astonishment. “But first years never—”

“I know.” Harry grinned. “I’m the youngest player in a century. That’s what Wood said, anyway.”

“But if you can’t have your own broomstick—” Hermione began.

“McGonagall said not to worry about it, that she’d work something out with the Pack.” Harry scratched his forehead, thinking. “She also said Padfoot owes her a favor now, but I don’t see how...”

“Oh, Harry, you’re so innocent,” said Hermione pityingly. “Don’t you know Padfoot’s wanted to see you play Quidditch for Gryffindor for years? The whole Pack has, really. And now you’re on the team a year ahead of schedule – and it’s because of McGonagall. She’ll probably collect by making Padfoot come in and give a lecture or something.”

Ron looked incredulous. “No offense, Hermione, but what would he lecture on?”

“Practical Defense skills,” said Hermione promptly. “He was an Auror before everything happened. He could be again – Madam Bones from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement contacted him about it – but he wants to keep on—”

“Doing other things,” Draco interrupted firmly. It was the first time he’d spoken since Harry’s revelation, and Harry realized he didn’t know what his brother thought about his sudden membership on the Quidditch team...

“Well, if he did give a lecture, I’d go,” said Ron.

“Someone call the Daily Prophet,” said Hermione, pretending to faint onto Harry’s bed. “Ronald Weasley wants to do something school-related.”

“Oh, shut up,” snapped Ron. “Just because I’m not a super brain like you—”

“I get a few perfect scores on my homework and suddenly I’m a super brain?”

“No, you’ve been a super brain for years. Now we’re just somewhere where it shows.”

Harry caught Draco’s eye and jerked his head towards the far side of the room, away from the bickering Ron and Hermione. Draco nodded and followed him.

“Draco, are you mad at me?” asked Harry tentatively. “I didn’t ask for it, honestly I didn’t, and I know we were always going to be on the team together, but it’s only one year—”

“Harry, shut up.” Draco was looking out the window. “I – don’t quite know how I feel,” he confessed. “I’m happy for you, truly I am, but I’m also really, really jealous. But I think that’ll go away soon. Don’t worry, I’m not about to stop speaking to you or anything. But I... can’t help wishing it could have included me somehow.”

“I wish that too,” said Harry, and meant it. Quidditch wouldn’t be the same without Draco, or, for that matter, without Ron. Ever since he had met the red-haired boy, his dreams of Hogwarts had included Ron in everything as a matter of course. He’d always known he wouldn’t share Quidditch with Neenie – Hermione, he corrected himself mentally. Better learn not even to think the other one, or it’ll fall out of my mouth in public and she’ll beat me up for it later. But the other boys had always been there in his imaginings, Draco showing off with the Quaffle as he loved to do, Ron –

Harry realized he didn’t know what position Ron would like best to play – the other boy switched around a lot in their pick-up games instead of sticking with one position preferentially as Harry and Draco did. He was about to ask when his stomach growled, and he remembered it was dinner time. “Is anyone else hungry?” he asked instead.

“Starving,” said Ron promptly. “And they’ve got steak and kidney pie tonight, I smelled it on my way in. Last one to the Great Hall’s a broken broomstick!”

“How can you eat that?” Ron asked Draco, who was attacking a large bowl of peanut butter fudge ice cream.

“I like the contrast. The sweet and the salt together is what makes it good.”

“Oh, so you like sweet and salt together.”

“I think I just said that.”

“Why don’t I help you, then.” Before Draco could realize what his friend was doing, Ron had picked up the salt shaker and salted Draco’s ice cream.

“Oh, that’s just nasty.” Draco took a spoonful of the ruined ice cream and plopped it on top of Ron’s apple tart. “See how you like it.”

Ron was about to retaliate with his goblet of pumpkin juice when Hermione bounced a raisin off his nose. “Oy, what was that for?”

“Challenge one cub, challenge all,” said Harry, adding a bit of his treacle tart to the mess on Ron’s plate. “Neenie – Hermione, sorry – can I have those if you’re not eating them?”

“Be my guest, you know I hate raisins.”

“Then why are you eating oatmeal raisin cookies?” asked Ron.

“Because they’re very good if you take the raisins out.”

“Hello, Potter,” said a voice Harry wasn’t interested in hearing at the moment.

“Hello, Nott,” he answered politely nonetheless, looking over the table at the Slytherin boy, flanked as usual by Crabbe and Goyle.

“What’s the matter, can’t your family come and pick you up yet?” Nott sneered. “Or are they – unavailable tonight?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Harry coolly.

“Oh, I’m sure you don’t.” Nott leaned closer. “Very clever of them, keeping it out of the papers that way. Couldn’t have the authorities

knowing what kind of – person – has a hand in the raising of Harry Potter. It's illegal, you know."

Beside him, Hermione made a small sound and drummed her fingers on the table. Harry flicked his eyes down to her hands and saw that she had made the Marauder sign for "I understand."

"I still don't know what you're talking about." Harry carefully directed his voice to both Nott and Hermione.

"Would you like me to explain?" Nott made it sound as if he were talking to a five-year-old who was asking why the sky was blue.

"Yes, I think I'd like that very much."

"Not here, though," said Nott, glancing around. "Too many... undesirables." His eyes lit on Ron. "Meet me at midnight in the trophy room. I'll explain then."

"And if I don't?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"It's against the rules to be out of our dorms that late. I could get in trouble."

"So could I."

"Swear wizard's oath," said Draco suddenly. "Swear you'll show up."

"Oh, if you insist," drawled Nott. He raised his right hand. "I, Theodore Nott, swear to be in the trophy room at midnight tonight, on my honor as a wizard. Happy now, Black?"

"Yes. Very."

"See you then, Potter." Nott turned and went back to his table.

"Would either of you care to explain why you're forcing me to break school rules?" demanded Harry.

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably and looked at Draco.

“Harry, if we were home, we’d be denning tonight,” said Draco. “Right?” he asked Hermione.

Hermione nodded.

Harry counted in his head and realized full moon was indeed tonight. He shrugged. “So what?” he asked. He didn’t see why it mattered if Nott knew they all slept in the same room occasionally.

“Harry, why do we den?” asked Hermione pleadingly. Her eyes flickered to Ron, and she began drawing designs in the crumbs on her plate. A series of crescents, Harry saw, getting progressively fatter and fatter until a full circle was achieved...

“You think he knows about Moony,” Harry said, suddenly comprehending.

Draco nodded, his face grim. “He must. That’s the only reason he’d say things like that.”

“How did he find out?”

“His father probably told him,” Hermione said, crumbling a cookie in her hands.

“How did his father find out, then?”

“Same way Lucius Malfoy did,” said Draco with bitterness in his voice.

Harry growled a little. “Wormtail.”

“You know, I don’t understand a word you’re saying,” said Ron a bit plaintively. “If you want me to go away, I will.”

“No, it’s all right,” said Harry, rubbing his forehead. “Sorry, Ron. That was rude.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“Nott knows a secret about us,” said Hermione, choosing her words carefully. “It’s not a problem for us, but it could cause problems if other people know about it.”

“What do you think he wants with me?” asked Harry.

“Probably wants to blackmail you,” said Draco. “Make you do something or give him something.”

“Or get you in trouble,” said Hermione. “If Filch caught you out of bed that late, you’d be in huge trouble. And after you just broke a rule today – I know Professor McGonagall let you off, but she might regret it if you break another rule tonight...”

“But I have to go,” said Harry. “That oath...”

“Is only binding on Nott,” interrupted Draco, grinning. “You didn’t swear, Harry. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

“But I said I would,” objected Harry.

“No, you didn’t,” said Hermione blithely. “Nott just thought you did. You didn’t agree to anything, Harry. You don’t have to go.”

“But...” Harry looked at Ron, his last hope to see what he was trying to explain.

“Tell me if this is true,” said Ron, looking at Draco and Hermione. “They never agree on anything.”

“Almost never.”

“So when they do agree on something, it’s probably really important. Right?”

“Right.”

“And they both agree you shouldn’t go meet Nott tonight.”

Harry sighed. "All right, three to one. You win. I won't go."

"He was probably going to set you up anyway," said Hermione as they left the Great Hall. "Bring Filch with him or something like that."

Harry stopped, struck by an idea. "He'll be mad when I don't show up," he said. "He might try to get revenge somehow."

Draco winced. "Hadn't thought of that. What should we do?"

"Play him at his own game," said Harry, feeling a smile starting. "He's oath-sworn to be there tonight. What if Professor McGonagall just happened to find out he was going to be there?"

"Points from Slytherin..." sing-songed Ron, grinning.

The four raced up the marble staircase towards Professor McGonagall's office.

Harry couldn't sleep that night. Even with Siss and his lion tucked in with him, the emptiness of the bed bothered him. He missed the rich warmth of the den, the sight and sound and feel and scent of other living, warm-blooded beings around him. His senses seemed abnormally acute, able to hear everything, from Dean and Seamus' quiet breathing to Neville's squeaky snores to Ron's slightly more raucous ones –

Harry frowned. There was something missing. Draco's sleep breathing pattern, which he knew as well as he knew anything, wasn't there.

If we both can't sleep, Neenie probably can't either.

Coming to a decision, Harry rolled out of bed.

"Egging, where are you going?" asked Siss sleepily.

"I am going to take my blankets downstairs and sleep by the fire. Would you like to come?"

"It will be cold up here without you. I will come."

Harry picked up the snake from her coil on his pillow, set her on his shoulder, and started stripping his bed as quietly as he could. Draco's head appeared between his bedcurtains.

"Den in the common room," said Harry under his breath. Draco nodded and disappeared again. Noises of sheets being removed came from inside his curtains.

"Harry?" said a sleepy voice. He turned to see Ron sitting up in bed, squinting at him in the bright light of the full moon pouring in through the dormitory windows. "What're you doing?"

"We're going to sleep down in the common room. You can come if you want."

"Why?"

"It's just something we do at home."

Ron considered this as Draco emerged from his bed, a large shapeless bundle over one arm. "I'll come," he said finally. "Should I bring my blankets and things?"

"Yeah, we'll need them."

Ron pulled the covers from his bed with quick efficiency. "Mum makes us strip our own beds at home," he explained as the boys descended the dormitory stairs. "Less work for her."

A brown bushy head popped out of a tangle of sheets in front of the fireplace as the boys approached. "I've been waiting ages. What took you so long?"

"We had to think of it first," said Harry, dropping his blankets next to Hermione. "Why didn't you just come and get us?"

Hermione yawned. "I would have in another few minutes," she said sleepily. "But now I don't have to."

There on the floor of the Gryffindor common room they taught Ron how to build a den, and crawled into it, staying a little farther from each other than they would at home out of respect for the newcomer, who might be uncomfortable with their ways at first.

But he will learn. He will be Pack. Harry was sure. One day he will sleep entangled with us and never think of it as strange. On that day – that night – he will truly be Pack.

“Be welcome, all, to this den-night,” said Draco, inaugurating the night with the beta’s traditional words. “We are Pack now. Pack together.”

“Pack forever,” answered Harry and Hermione, with Ron an awkward second to their glib recital.

“Who will tell a story?” asked Hermione, taking up the role of alpha female, since she was the only girl in the group. “Who will remind us of what it is to be Pack?”

“No,” said Harry regretfully, for he loved den-night stories. But it was late and they had Potions in the morning. “No stories tonight. It’s too late. We need to sleep.”

Everyone nodded.

“We’ll need to be up early, too,” said Ron, punching his pillow into shape. “To get this cleared up before everyone sees us.” He had obviously been a bit surprised to see Hermione waiting for them, but had accepted her part in the sleeping arrangements with good grace. And he was right, Harry realized. They didn’t need the talk that being found asleep in front of the fire with a girl would cause.

“I bid you good night and fair dreams, then,” said Harry, hearing in his mind Moony’s voice saying the same thing, or Danger’s voice speaking for him. “May this night rest us all, and we rise in the morning stronger for it.”

“May it be so,” answered the others.

The Pack.

My Pack. I'm an alpha now.

And I can't ever forget it.

What I do affects them.

Harry rolled over and gazed into the flames. Thoughts of Moony and Danger lingered, grew stronger, moved in interesting ways.

They can call fire. It serves them. The way it served Godric Gryffindor and his children. And Danger gets her powers from the Founders...

A dreamy voice echoed inside his head, words blurred by time or forgetfulness. One word came to the fore: "thank".

"Thank you, Godric," Harry murmured on the edge of sleep.

His eyes closed. He did not see the effect his words had brought about.

But there was an effect. Sincere gratitude always has an effect.

Seldom, though, is it quite so visible...

(A/N: And what was the effect of Harry's words? Well, you'll have to wait until next time to find that out, won't you now!

Don't forget to review, and visit the Yahoo group – I answer questions there, I promise I do, unless they're story points and giving them away would reduce your enjoyment!)

Chapter 4: Den

“Harry?”

“Hmm?”

“Harry, wake up.”

In a leisurely sort of way, Harry’s mind began to work. He was at school, at Hogwarts, and it was Friday morning. He was lying on a rather harder surface than his mattress, but he’d still slept better there than he had his entire two weeks at school – so well, in fact, that he was waking up much more slowly than he usually did.

It was the common room floor, Harry recalled. He, Draco, Hermione, and Ron had denned there the night before. That was where he was, and why he’d slept so well.

And the voice still trying to rouse him was familiar. Somewhat high-pitched, a trifle squeaky and nervous-sounding...

“Neville?” Harry opened his eyes to see the blurred outline of his housemate hovering over him. “Good morning.” He sat up and yawned slightly.

“Good morning,” answered Neville automatically, staring at him. “Why are you all sleeping down here?”

Harry shrugged, standing up to retrieve his glasses, which he’d left on the nearest table so he didn’t roll over on them. “We wanted to.”

“Did you do that?”

“What?”

Neville pointed. Harry turned to look.

Part of the wall beside the fireplace was no longer there. A hole gaped where it had been, revealing what looked like the entrance to a stone slide. Harry cautiously stuck his hand into the opening, ready to

pull back if his fingers touched stone, but the hole was real enough, as was the slide. It felt slick and ready for use.

"Is that Hermione?" asked Neville, pointing at the brown hair just visible at one side of the untidy pile of blankets which constituted their den.

"Yes."

Neville seemed a bit nonplussed by the calm way Harry was treating his questions. "Why is she sleeping here with you?"

"Because she wanted to."

Their voices were rousing the other sleepers. "I won't tell anyone," said Neville hastily as Draco sat up, rubbing his eyes. "About this."

"Thanks."

"What's that?" asked Draco, pointing at the hole in the wall.

"Don't know. It was here when I woke up."

"It was here when I came down," volunteered Neville. "Was it here when you went to, er, bed?"

"No, I think we would have noticed a big hole in the wall," said Harry as Ron grunted loudly and rolled over. "We were tired, but not that tired. Neville, what time is it?"

Neville checked his watch. "About 7:15."

"We don't have Potions until 9," said Harry, looking down the slide. He grinned at Draco. "Want to do some Marauding?"

"I don't know," said Draco doubtfully. "We don't know where it goes."

"What's happening?" asked Ron, finally getting his eyes open after several moments of trying.

"There's a big hole in the wall," said Draco.

Ron focused on it. "Yeah, there is," he said sleepily. "How'd that get there?"

"We don't know yet."

"Where's it go?"

"We don't know that either." Draco's face lit up suddenly. "But I know how we can find out. Wait here." He hurried to the boys' stairs.

"Where's he going?" asked Hermione, emerging from under the blankets with her hair in wild disarray (which really didn't make it look too different from the way it usually did, Harry thought). Neville looked a bit flustered to be in the presence of a girl in pajamas, but Hermione didn't even seem to notice.

"I'm not sure." Harry watched his brother climb the stairs and enter one of the dormitories.

"That's not ours," said Ron. "What's he doing in the third years' dorm?"

"The twins are third years." Hermione yawned. "Maybe he's borrowing the Map."

Harry hit himself on the forehead. The Map, of course. The Marauders' Map would be able to tell them if this new area of the school was safe or not.

Or will it? Padfoot and Moony had never told them anything about a secret passage in the Gryffindor common room. If the Marauders didn't know about it, will it still show up on the Map?

Draco emerged from the room, waving the tattered piece of parchment in triumph. He slid down the banister and dismounted smoothly at the bottom, grinning.

“Very nice,” said Harry, accepting the Map from his brother. “Anyone have their wand on them?”

“I do,” said Neville, pulling it out of his pocket. “What’s that?”

“Magic map,” said Ron nonchalantly, coming to stand with the other boys. Hermione shook her hair out of her face and joined them.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” said Harry, touching Neville’s wand to the center of the parchment.

Neville stared as the Map activated. “It shows everything on the grounds,” explained Harry, waiting for the lines to finish appearing. “Everything and everyone. And as far as we know, it can’t be fooled.”

Sensing what its user wanted, the Map was displaying a close-up of the Gryffindor common room. “That’s me!” said Neville in surprise, pointing at the ink dot labeled “Neville Longbottom,” which was standing between dots labeled “Draco Black” and “Ron Weasley”.

“Everyone means everyone, Neville,” said Hermione with a smile. “Let’s see if it’s got our mysterious passage...”

Sure enough, the hole in the wall was on the Map, as was a little scroll-like picture beside it. Hermione read aloud the writing on the scroll, which unrolled as she read.

“This passage leads to one of the most interesting secrets of Hogwarts. Anyone entering these rooms will be pleasantly surprised, but not harmed. There are many ways in – you have discovered only one of them. The passwords for the other ways are similar, but perhaps not the same. Best of luck in discovering them all.”

“Good enough for me,” said Harry, rolling up the Map and sticking it into the pocket of his pajamas.

“Harry, are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Hermione.

“No. But the Map says it’s safe. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You could get stuck there – wherever there is,” said Ron. “And we don’t even know what the password is to get you out.”

“If there’s a way in, there has to be a way out,” said Harry reasonably. “And I’ve got the Map. I’ll manage.”

“You could get lost,” said Draco. “You might miss Potions.”

“And what’s so bad about that?”

“Snape taking a point off Gryffindor for every minute you’re late?”

Harry winced. “True enough. All right, I’ll only look around for five minutes. Then I’ll come back. That do?”

“Is there any way to stop you?” Hermione wanted to know.

“Probably not.”

“Then all right. Five minutes. I’ll be timing you.”

“With what?”

“Neville, can I borrow your watch?”

Neville nodded, slid it off his wrist, and handed it over. “You can use my wand, if you want to,” he said as Harry made to return it. “Just be careful with it – it was my dad’s.”

“All right. Wish me luck.”

Draco and Hermione scent-touched him, Ron punched him lightly on the shoulder, and Neville shook his hand a bit awkwardly.

There was a bar set into the wall over the top of the slide, Harry noticed as he approached it, not in the slide itself but above it – probably so people could grab on and swing themselves in quickly, but wouldn’t hit their heads on it as they slid. He hoisted himself into the slide with its help.

“Here I go,” he said, and pushed off.

The slide was tall enough that he could sit up as he went, and once he'd rounded two bends, entirely dark. He fumbled Neville's wand out of his pocket. “Lumos,” he said, and was rewarded with a rather faint light, probably not strong enough to read by, but strong enough that he could see the smooth, bare walls of the tunnel. The stone was slick against his hands as he touched it, and he was moving fairly fast.

Then the floor fell out from under him.

But before he had time to do more than gasp at the shock of falling, he'd landed with a whump on something soft.

Red, was his first impression. Lots of red.

He'd fallen into a handsomely appointed bedroom. There was light coming from somewhere (other than the wand in his hand), and it showed him that the double bed he lay on, the chest of drawers and wardrobe to his left, and the desk and chair to his right were all done in red and gold, as were the walls and carpeted floor, but not in such a way that the room felt stifling or overdone. It was just a touch grand but still welcoming, the sort of room Harry wouldn't have minded having for himself.

So far so good. Harry climbed off the bed, which was quite comfortable, and went to the door, which was in the opposite one of the eight walls from the one which the head of the bed sat against. The knob turned in his hand, and he pushed the door open.

The room beyond was also octagonal, but these walls were grey stone, each hung with a banner above a door, all seemingly identical to the one he had entered by. The banner above this door, as well as the one next to it on the left, was red. The next two banners to the left were blue, green adorned the opposite walls, and yellow to Harry's right completed the circle. In the center of the room was a large round table, with (Harry took a quick count) twelve chairs around it.

He pulled out the Map and looked at it. The small cluster of four dots gathered around the hole in the Gryffindor common room wall drew his eye first. Then he realized something.

"I'm not on here," he said aloud.

You're in an Unplottable area of the castle, the Map printed in a bit of clear space to one side. No one who doesn't know a password to one of the doors can find you here.

"How many doors are there?"

Eight.

"Do any of them lead out?"

They all do, with the right password.

"Can I get out the same way I came in?"

Certainly. Three jumps ought to do it. And the password, of course.

"What password?"

You said it last night, don't you remember?

"Er, no."

Well, you're still new at this, so you get one for free. "Thank you, Godric."

"All right. Thanks."

You're welcome. The Map wiped the written conversation away.

"Three jumps," Harry ruminated aloud. "Three jumps on what?" Then he felt stupid.

On the bed, of course. The way I came in.

He returned to the red bedroom, climbed up on the bed, and began bouncing. One. Two. Three.

“Thank you, Godric,” he said aloud as he jumped the third time.

The ceiling opened over his head, and he shot upwards into it. It closed again below him, depositing him in a sitting position on the floor, and before he could do anything, he was sliding again – only this time, he was sliding uphill –

A moment later, he could see light from up ahead, and in a few seconds he was climbing out of the hole in the wall, having come to a halt at its rim, with his feet dangling down the wall.

“What’s down there?” asked Ron before Harry had even put his feet on the floor.

“A bedroom. What looks like a meeting room. And a whole bunch of other doors.”

“Are they locked?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you open them, then?”

“Because someone was timing me and probably would have gone and got a teacher if I hadn’t come back within my five minutes.” Harry stared hard at Hermione, who stared back unabashedly. “And because I think we should all get a look. Anyone else game?”

“Sure,” said Draco, hands already on the bar. “How does it work?”

“It’s just a slide, like at a playground or something. Then the floor drops out from under you, and you land on a bed. Yell back up when you’re clear so we know to send the next person down.”

“All right.” Draco swung himself into the tube and disappeared. After a few moments, a yell echoed up into the common room. “All clear!”

“Neville?” Harry gestured to the open tube.

“Erm – ladies first,” stammered Neville.

Hermione lifted her eyebrows in frosty amusement, a mannerism Harry was sure she’d learned from Letha. “If you insist,” she said in the tone which matched the expression, and was in the tube and gone in a flash.

Neville went next (with a boost from Harry to get him in), then Ron. Before Harry climbed in the second time, he paused.

“Thank you, Godric,” he said again, experimentally, and watched a section of stone wall slide out of a slot and close off the tunnel. The illusion of the unbroken wall was perfect. If you didn’t know it was there, you would never guess – which was obviously the point. Harry repeated the password to open the tunnel again, climbed in, and closed it behind himself before he pushed off.

No sense in leaving it open and making everyone wonder what’s down the interesting hole.

His friends were waiting for him at the bottom, some more impatiently than others – Ron, in particular, looked quiveringly eager to explore this new and fascinating area of the castle. Neville seemed a little scared, but the obvious excitement of the rest of the group was rubbing off on him, Harry thought.

“Neville, can you keep us updated on the time?” Hermione was saying as Harry landed on the bed. “We need to be out of here by eight o’clock or someone’s going to wonder where we are. 8:15, tops.”

“I can do that.” Neville nodded confidently and checked his watch. “It’s 7:21 now.”

“So we’re good for almost an hour,” said Harry, getting to his feet. “Everyone ready?”

Four nods answered him.

“Lady and gentlemen, the main room,” announced Draco, opening the door with a flourish. “The décor is primitive and mostly primary, with a daring touch of secondary in places.”

“Say that again in English,” said Ron.

“It’s old fashioned and uses a lot of simple bright colors.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did.”

Harry opened the door under the other red banner.

Wow, he thought to himself.

“Kitchen,” said Draco dismissively from behind him. “Boring.”

Harry privately disagreed. The stove took up most of one wall by itself. It had six burners, which appeared to be gas rather than electric, and one of the biggest ovens Harry had ever seen. I wonder how many cookies you could bake in there at one time?

But his friends were fidgeting, so he closed the door and moved on.

I can always come back.

The next door to the left, under a blue banner, was almost the twin of the red bedroom, except that it was (unsurprisingly) blue. Hermione went in and ran her hand along the desk. “There’s no dust,” she said, coming back out. “It’s like people were just here yesterday.”

“There’s probably a permanent cleaning spell in place in here,” said Ron. “To keep it from getting messy.”

“Or maybe the house elves know about it,” said Neville, looking surprised at his own daring in speaking up. “Maybe they come in and clean.”

“Could be either.” Harry opened the other blue door.

Hermione gave a cry of delight. The room was a library. Draco followed her into the room, looking rather delighted himself, and as Harry entered he saw the reason why.

Of course. A piano.

Draco lifted the lid and touched the keys. “Nothing,” he said. “No dust at all.” He tried a few chords. “And it’s even in tune.” He began to play something Harry vaguely recognized as a favorite piece of Padfoot’s, something fairly lively and up-tempo.

Hermione was lost in rapturous contemplation of the shelf-lined walls. Ron and Harry exchanged weary glances – almost four years of friendship, in one case, and nine and a half years of siblinghood, in the other, had taught both boys that Miss Granger-Lupin had to be physically removed from the presence of books before she would make any kind of sense.

“I think I like this place,” volunteered Neville, who was still standing in the doorway. “It feels friendly. Almost like it was waiting for us.”

“I think I like it too,” said Harry, steering Hermione out the door. “And we haven’t even seen what’s behind half the doors yet...”

The first green door was, predictably, a green bedroom, which wasn’t as repellent to Harry as he would have thought it would be. Ron refused to enter it, saying he felt like he was going to drown, but Harry, Hermione, and Neville went inside to look at the decorations, and Draco lay down on the bed and let his head dangle off the edge. “Why are you all walking on the ceiling?” he asked, laughing.

“Why are you about to fall off the bed?” returned Hermione.

“I’m not – oof.” Hermione’s quick eye had seen Draco’s weight shifting the covers on the bed, and the quilt and the blond boy fell to the floor in a tangled heap. He began to extricate himself, then paused. “There’s something under the bed,” he called out. “I think it’s a portrait.”

“Let’s get it out, then,” said Harry, joining Draco on the floor. He felt a surge of excitement. A portrait might be able to tell them who had made this place, and why...

The two boys together were able to wrestle the heavy frame out and lean it up against the bottom of the bed for everyone to look at.

It was empty, except for a chair done in what looked like green dragon leather.

“That’s boring,” said Ron. “Who’s it supposed to be, Salazar Slytherin?”

“Not nearly,” said a voice from the portrait, and the occupant strolled into view.

“Harry, he looks like you,” blurted Neville, staring at the man who seated himself in the chair. “Like you grown up.”

Harry too was staring. The man did indeed bear a resemblance to him – not the almost mirror-image likeness he knew he had to his father, but a more general sort of thing – both of them were dark-haired, green-eyed, and rather confident-looking... but more than that, he had the oddest feeling that he’d seen this man somewhere before...

“Yes, we do look a bit alike,” the portrait acknowledged, “but there’s nothing in it. You can call me Al. And you’re Harry, Hermione, Draco, Neville, and Ron. Right?”

“How’d you know that?” asked Neville with a trace of fear in his voice.

“Word gets around.” The man leaned back in his chair and regarded them all lazily. “I’m here to tell you that you’re on the right track one hundred percent. Especially you, Neville. This place has been waiting for you, more or less. Don’t worry about any previous tenants coming back to bother you – they won’t. They’d be delighted that you’ve found it. So don’t be afraid to use it. It belongs to you. Really, it all

belongs to you in a way.” He smiled as if he had a secret. “The school is your oyster. All you have to do is find the pearl.”

He rose and walked casually out of the frame.

“This place is ours?” Draco looked around at the opulence of their surroundings. “Wicked.”

“Dibs on the red bedroom,” said Ron quickly.

“Only if you’ll share,” said Harry, getting up. “There’s five of us and only four bedrooms, someone’s going to have to.”

“You’re not thinking of actually moving in down here?” Hermione sounded shocked.

“Why not?” asked Ron.

“We can’t. We have to stay in the dorms or someone will find out about this. Maybe we can den down here, but that’s all. We’ll be missed if we leave any oftener than that.”

Ron looked disappointed, but he nodded, acknowledging Hermione’s point. This place would only continue to be special if it remained theirs and theirs alone.

“Denning down here sounds good,” said Draco, getting to his feet. “That way no one can walk in on us.”

“Speaking of walking in, Neville, what time is it?” asked Harry suddenly.

“7:45. And I’m really sorry I found you doing that – denning, is it called?” Neville flushed slightly. “I didn’t mean to.”

“We were being stupid,” said Hermione, leading the way out of the green bedroom. “Doing it right there in the common room where anyone could see us. We were just lucky it wasn’t someone like Percy.”

Ron shivered. "Please. Don't even think that. Do you know what my perfect prefect brother would say if he found me sleeping in a pile of sheets with a girl?"

"I don't think I want to know," said Draco as Harry opened the other green door.

The room beyond it was vast and echoing. As they stepped through the door, something tickled Harry's bare feet. He looked down.

"Grass?" he said aloud in bemusement.

The lights came on. Ron gasped. Harry's heart leapt.

They were standing at one end of what appeared to be an indoor Quidditch pitch, complete with goal hoops and spectator stands around the walls.

"Someone pinch me," moaned Ron in what sounded like ecstasy.

Hermione obliged.

"It's not a dream..." Ron muttered, stumbling to the base of one of the goal hoops and leaning against it.

"Is that a broomshed I see over there?" asked Draco, pointing.

There was a general rush in that direction. Even Ron recovered enough to join in. "School brooms," he said dismissively, looking at the dozen broomsticks neatly arrayed in the shed. "They'll get you up in the air, but not much speed or maneuverability."

"If everyone's got the same, then there's no problem, is there?" asked Hermione, looking over the boys' shoulders. "And – is that a Quidditch set in the back?"

It was. Just for fun, Harry released the Snitch and took off after it, to the whoops and cheers of his friends. It only took him about five minutes to track it down and catch up with it, but he knew with

thirteen other players and three other balls on the pitch, his job would be much harder.

But that's why they give me the hundred and fifty points.

There were only the yellow doors left now, and they were not quite a disappointment, but not nearly as exciting to anyone as the others had been. The first door, of course, was a bedroom done in differing shades of yellow, and the second –

"Well, if we were going to stay here for any length of time, we'd need one, of course," said Hermione, peering in. "Still, a bathroom's a bathroom."

"I like the window," said Neville, running his hand along the dust-free sill. "I think it's the only one here. It may not even be real – I don't think that's Hogwarts grounds out there – but it's nice to see some sunlight. And I bet I could put a plant or two on this windowsill."

"Probably what it's there for," Harry agreed.

"Even the chairs match the color scheme," said Draco from the main room, pulling one of them out from the large round table. "Three in each color. Very coordinated."

"We could practically move in down here," Ron said, sitting on the edge of the table. "We'd never have to leave."

"As long as we had food," Hermione pointed out. "But you're right. We do seem to have just about everything else we could need."

Harry sighed, looking around at the room. Already he felt dennisish about the place, an odd mixture of proprietary protectiveness and comfortable security, but even without asking Neville, he knew they were close to their deadline. "We should get back," he said reluctantly.

No one wanted to leave, but they all knew they'd be missed if they stayed much longer. One by one, they climbed onto the red bed, jumped three times, and said, "Thank you, Godric" to open the ceiling

and return to the Gryffindor common room. Harry went last, and made a silent promise as he looked around the room.

I'll be back. I'll be back soon.

Ron and Hermione were working together this week in Potions, with Hermione keeping an eye on Neville, who was working with Dean Thomas. Ron had just finished measuring out seven ounces of pomegranate juice when there was a muffled explosion from the other side of the room.

"Everyone, stay calm," intoned Snape, sweeping over to the site of the trouble. "Mr. Nott, what is this?"

"I... don't know, Professor," said Nott, looking rather confused. "What is it?"

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks. That amount of cheek from a Gryffindor would have cost them at least ten house points, possibly more. But Nott was a Slytherin, and therefore, in what passed for Snape's greasy mind, entitled to a free ride to the hospital wing without even a mention of punishment.

"I think I hate him," said Ron idly as the Gryffindors climbed the stairs to the entrance hall.

"You're not sure?" asked Draco.

"Give me another week, then I will be."

Hermione, ahead of them, stopped dead, causing Draco to bump into her. "Neenie – Hermione, sorry – what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," said Hermione. "There's actually something right. Look at the house point counters."

"What about them?" asked Harry.

"Look at Slytherin's. Doesn't it look... lower to you?"

"I don't have a perfect memory. Does it?"

"It does – it is. It was at least twenty points higher yesterday."

Ron snickered. "D'you think someone get caught out of bed?"

"I think that's a distinct possibility," drawled Draco, grinning. "Come on, let's get lunch."

The homework load was increasing as the year got underway, with the corollary that the cubs were unable to investigate their newest discovery (which they were now referring to as their den) any further over the next week. Still, it was exciting to have a secret – and such a secret. A whole little world of their own, which no one else knew about...

Nott was being very quiet in the hallways and in the Great Hall at mealtimes. Harry hoped that getting twenty points docked from Slytherin for being caught out of bed at midnight by Professor McGonagall (the story had finally got around to them via the twins on Saturday) had shut him up, if not for good, then for a little while at least.

On Thursday, Harry woke up with a feeling of dread. Thursday meant Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Defense meant Lockhart, and quite possibly another round in the white fur suit, since they hadn't finished demonstrating everything Lockhart had done to the yeti.

Hermione, on the other hand, was bouncing with happiness when the boys joined her in the common room. "Guess what today is," she said, grinning.

"Many happy returns, Hermione," said Draco, giving her a little bow.

"Oh, no fair, you knew."

"You are my sister."

"Oh, it's your birthday?" asked Ron. "Many happy returns – I'm still used to thinking of you two as twins, with the summer birthday..."

Hermione and Draco laughed.

Harry felt terrible as he climbed out the portrait hole. It was his sister's birthday, and he hadn't remembered.

Can this day get any worse?

"Potter."

He looked up. Professor McGonagall was standing in front of him.

"You three," she said, indicating him, Draco, and Hermione. "My office. Now."

"What did we do?" protested Hermione.

"I will not tolerate that tone of voice, Miss Granger-Lupin. Come with me."

"See you," Harry muttered to a confused-looking Ron as the cubs set off after McGonagall.

He looks like I feel. What did we do?

Draco looked back at him and shrugged. Harry returned the gesture.

Was it the den? Is that some kind of secret place students aren't supposed to know about? But the portrait had said it was theirs, and no one would mind that they were using it...

McGonagall stopped in front of her office door and opened it. The room within was dark. "Inside," she said, waving them in.

This is officially strange.

But Harry stepped between Draco and Hermione and led the way into the room. As soon as Hermione's heels had cleared the doorframe, Professor McGonagall closed the door behind them, plunging them into total darkness.

This is VERY strange...

“Surprise!” chorused five voices as the lights came on.

Meghan and the Pack-parents were standing in the middle of the office.

The next few minutes were devoted to the highly decorous and restrained greetings of a Pack which had been separated for two and a half weeks. Harry thought Hermione and Meghan’s squeals could probably have been heard in Snape’s office in the dungeons, but it didn’t bother him. He was too busy hugging and being hugged by both Danger and Letha at the same time, then breaking away to join the roughhousing which Draco, Padfoot, and Moony had initiated.

“Many happy returns, Hermione,” said Padfoot after everything had settled down a bit. “Accio Present.” A large, squarish package flew across the room and landed in Padfoot’s hands, and he handed it over to Hermione.

Hermione ripped into it eagerly and beamed when she saw what it was. “My very own copy of Hogwarts, a History! It’s just what I wanted, thank you!”

“I told you, you’ll never go wrong if you buy books for a Granger-Lupin,” said Danger, smiling fondly at her sister. “And now the other one.”

“Gentlemen,” said Moony, looking at Harry and Draco. “It has come to our attention that one of you has need of a broomstick. But the school rules state that first years may not have their own broomsticks.”

“However,” added Letha, looking highly smug, “nothing in the rules states that two first years may not jointly own a broomstick.”

“And since it would have been unfair to designate either of your current personal brooms as suddenly being owned by both of you, we simply had to go out and get a new one,” said Danger sweetly.

“Happy un-birthday,” Padfoot finished, placing a long parcel in both boys’ laps.

Harry and Draco tore into it eagerly.

“Wow,” Harry breathed as he saw what it was. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“It’s a Nimbus Two Thousand,” said Draco in awe. “Dibs on first ride – since you’ll be using it more, Harry,” he added quickly.

“Fine.” Harry stroked the smooth handle lovingly. “It’s gorgeous.”

“You’re to share it this year, or the deal’s off,” said Moony. “Harry uses it for Quidditch, obviously, but Draco has to get some time using it. At the end of the year, it reverts to one of you, and the other one gets a new broom of his own. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Harry as Draco nodded, a bit awkwardly because he obviously didn’t want to take his eyes off the gleaming broom in his lap.

“We should get to breakfast,” said Hermione regretfully, still hugging her book. “And Defense class...”

“You’ve been officially excused from Defense Against the Dark Arts this morning,” said Letha. “Special treat for a birthday girl and her brothers.”

“And we’ll all be having breakfast in here,” said Padfoot as a loud crack in the corner signaled the appearance of a pair of house-elves. “Good morning, Dobby, Kady. Can we start with pumpkin juice for everyone?”

“Of course, sir.”

Harry grinned as Moony and Letha began conjuring a table and chairs.

No Lockhart today. The best broomstick in the world. And a whole morning with the Pack.

I'd say this day's turning around...

"Your crazy godfather did a jig on the roof when he heard the news," said Danger close to his ear. "How far did you dive?"

Harry gladly abandoned philosophical thought to talk flying. Hermione's birthday breakfast lasted approximately two hours, at the end of which time the Pack-adults allowed Meghan to go to Gryffindor Tower with the other cubs while they went on errands of their own inside the castle. "Be in the entrance hall in fifteen minutes, Pearl," Letha called after them. "And no secret passages!"

"Understand," Hermione called back.

"Understand, but not obey," said Draco, grinning.

The older cubs had told Meghan about the den in their letters, and she was eager to see it for herself. Harry figured they should have the common room to themselves, since morning classes didn't end for another half-hour.

"Curly tail," he said to the Fat Lady, and climbed through the portrait hole to a scene so strange he was sure he must be dreaming.

Neville was standing on a table, wearing what looked like a paper crown from a Christmas cracker and smiling nervously as Ron, Seamus, and Dean, who were kneeling in a circle around his table, bowed down to him repeatedly. Parvati, Lavender, and Colleen were sitting over by the far wall, looking sulky.

"Come, worship with us," Seamus called out expansively. "Worship the mighty Longbottom, who brought low the insufferable blowhard Professor Lockhart."

Draco snickered. "Neville, what did you do?"

"I didn't mean to," protested Neville, with a tone in his voice that said he'd been over this already, with a number of people. "It was an accident."

“Accident or not, it was brilliant,” said Ron decisively, getting up. Meghan giggled and ran to take his place, joining in the clumsily coordinated bowing. “Lockhart kept delaying starting class for you, Harry – even though McGonagall told him you and Hermione and Draco wouldn’t be there – where were you, anyway? And what’s that?” He had apparently just noticed the long parcel over Draco’s shoulder.

“Later,” said Hermione, waving an impatient hand. “What happened?”

“Well, after he finally figured out you weren’t going to show up, he put Neville in the stupid fur suit. And he kept on telling him to be more aggressive, to show more fight. ‘Come on, Longbottom, take a good swipe at my head. Not like that, harder. Harder, put some force behind it.’” Ron imitated Lockhart’s pompous tones rather well, actually, Harry thought. “And Neville did. Knocked Lockhart’s hat off...” Ron guffawed. “And his hair went with it!”

“His hair?” repeated Harry.

“He’s bald as a Bludger! All that hair of his – it’s a wig!”

Harry and Draco almost fell over laughing.

“It’s not funny!” snapped Hermione. “You’re just rude!”

“What did he do?” Harry managed to get out, ignoring his sister’s remark.

“Stood there for a second,” Ron related. “Neville was beet-red and stammering out how sorry he was. And finally after a few moments he said, ‘Class dismissed. No homework.’ And we all ran for the door before we laughed in his face. A few of the Hufflepuffs almost killed themselves falling down the stairs, they were laughing so hard.”

If there had been stairs anywhere nearby, Harry was sure he could have replicated this feat. The very idea of a bald Lockhart was simply too funny to resist.

Hermione sniffed. "Boys," she said in a tone of deep disgust, and stalked over to sit with the other girls.

After everyone was done worshiping at Neville's shrine and he had finally been permitted to get down off the table, Harry and Draco took him and Ron upstairs to show off their prize, while a still disgruntled Hermione walked Meghan down to the entrance hall.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even touched one."

"Go ahead, then," said Draco, waving at the broomstick. "It won't break. I don't think."

Ron ran his hand along the handle reverently. "It's beautiful." He looked hopefully at the cubs. "Can I ride it? Please? Just once?"

"Draco gets it this afternoon, and I start Quidditch practice tonight," Harry said. "But I think you can ride it tomorrow afternoon. Neville, you want a turn?"

Neville shook his head hurriedly. "No, no, that's all right. I haven't even really got the hang of taking off and landing yet. I'd probably break it or hurt myself again. But... can I come and watch?"

"Of course," Harry said. "Be glad to have you."

(A/N: Life's starting to get a tad more interesting, no? Not incredible amounts of story action here, but that will be made up for next chapter. And the Hogwarts den will be a fairly large part of the story, so don't forget about it! Remember, there are seven more doors to it – where could they be, and what are the passwords? Speculations gladly accepted on Yahoo group!)

Chapter 5: Ten Years Tonight

The days began to get chilly as September faded pleasantly into October. Harry was absent from the common room three evenings a week now with Quidditch practice, which meant he needed Hermione's help more than ever to keep up with all his work. Some of the things she did for him might, by a very strict person, have been regarded as cheating, but it was all in the family. Or the Pack.

11 October marked the first night spent in the Hogwarts Den, as it was now known to the eight people who knew about it (Ron had written Ginny, and Draco Luna, to let them know about the discovery, and both girls had been sworn to secrecy, as had Meghan). It was also the first "real" den-night at Hogwarts, since it was the first that involved stories.

Ron told one about the day Fred had given him an Acid Pop, which had burnt a hole through his tongue. "It was just the October before you moved in, I was seven and Fred was nine, and I yelled so loud I think I blew a couple tiles off the roof – Mum was furious, after she got me healed up she walloped Fred with her broomstick." Half-serious plans were made to avenge this long-accomplished but still dastardly trick by the twins.

Neville shared a story about his gran's enormous handbag – when he'd been very small, not even two yet, he'd opened it up, crawled in, and gone to sleep, to be found by his very worried grandmother about an hour later when she snatched up her bag to go out looking for her missing grandson. "I don't remember, of course, but she tells the story every Christmas and Easter when the family gets together," said Neville, sounding a bit aggrieved. "Maybe I'll stay here this Christmas so I don't have to hear it again."

"Or maybe you'll get invited to someone else's house," suggested Draco innocently.

Hermione kicked him.

"What?"

The cubs, of course, had plenty of stories to share, even discounting the ones which made mention of Animagus abilities and lycanthropy. Hermione recounted how she had used to lie in her tree in the backyard and read to the other cubs, and how Harry would do a running translation of the story into Parseltongue. It was eerily reminiscent of the current scene, since Siss had accompanied Harry to den-night once again, and he was giving her the gist of the conversation as it went on.

Harry, for his part, told the story about finding Siss at the Apothecary. "Siss, whatever happened to Hesseh?" he asked when the story was over, realizing he didn't know what had become of his other friend from the London Den.

"A meat-eating bird took him, the summer after you went away."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Do not be. It was very quick, and all that lives must die."

Snakes, Harry had discovered, could be very philosophical.

Draco went last. He had chosen to tell about his life before he'd become Pack, when he'd still been a Malfoy. "I've been getting questions from all over, in all kinds of ways," he had told Harry as they waited for the common room to clear out. "From the oh-so-delicate to as blunt as Nott – though no one else was quite that rude. I figure this way I'll get it out so Ron and Neville know about it, and then they won't have to ask."

"I was an arrogant little berk then," said Draco now, with an odd mixture of pride and embarrassment. "I thought everything my size or smaller belonged to me, and everything bigger belonged to my father. And as far as my world went, I was right. I almost never went out of the house – I hardly ever left my rooms. I had a bathroom off my bedroom, and Dobby brought me my meals there most of the time. Sometimes, on special occasions, I'd eat downstairs with my parents, but that didn't happen often. And sometimes other kids would come to play, sort of. None of us really knew how to play at all. We just sat there trying to act like our parents or push each other around."

Draco frowned. "You know, I think Nott might have been one of those kids – with his father and – Lucius Malfoy – being who they were, it's likely. I do remember a little weedy kid coming a couple of times. And I'm positive I met Crabbe and Goyle at least once. I remember thinking they were big, dumb blockheads."

"And what do you think now?" asked Harry.

"Same."

"Hear, hear," said Ron.

"What did you do the rest of the time?" queried Neville, who looked fascinated.

"I don't really remember. I think I've blocked it out. I do remember being horrendously bored a lot, though. I would lie in front of the fire and stare at it for hours, and then I'd get up and run around and knock things over and break things, and make Dobby fix them with his magic so I wouldn't get in trouble."

"And then the Pack came," said Hermione after a moment of silence.

Draco nodded. "And then the Pack came. And my world turned totally upside down overnight, and I liked it."

Neville leaned forward. "What happened then?"

"I thought we told you this already," said Harry. "On the train."

"You may have, but I don't really remember," confessed Neville. "I'm terrible that way. I'm always forgetting things."

Hermione looked at her watch. "It's not too late yet. There's time for another story, I think. If everyone wants to hear it."

Ron and Harry both nodded. "I like this one," Ron said. "I like the part about you smashing into Lucius Malfoy, Harry, and knocking him over."

"Be fair, Neenie helped."

Hermione bristled for a moment, then sighed. "You may call me that here," she said with dignity. "Here and only here. It will be my in-den name. Does that suit you?"

"Perfectly," said Harry, copying her tone and mannerisms exactly, making the other boys laugh.

Hermione reached over and flicked his ear with her fingers.

"Ow."

"It started on a normal night," Draco began quickly, obviously hoping to defray further violence. "I'd had dinner already, and I was just watching the fire when my father came in. I was scared at first, and then I was surprised, because he had two other kids about my age with him, on a stretcher he was hovering beside him. He picked up the boy and put him on my bed, and kind of dumped the girl off the stretcher without touching her himself, and he told me the boy was going to live with us and be my new brother..."

"Today, students," squeaked Professor Flitwick, standing on his desk, "we're going to learn the basic Levitation Charm. You should all have read the section in your books about this, so everyone say the incantation together, one, two, three!"

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry dutifully chanted with everyone else.

"Excellent, and now let's all practice that nice wand movement, the swish and flick..."

Harry swished and flicked, though he found the smell of baking pumpkin highly distracting. Padfoot claimed that if he needed to write a section in his books about a really great meal, he just thought about Hogwarts holiday feasts. The start-of-term banquet had been excellent, of course, and the food was good every day, but Moony and Letha backed Padfoot up in claiming holiday feasts were something out of the ordinary...

“Mr. Potter!” Professor Flitwick’s voice broke through Harry’s reverie.

“Er, yes, sir?”

“You’ll be working with Mr. Boot. Move down a few seats, change places with Miss Patil – Miss Padma Patil, sorry, dear...”

Harry swapped seats with Parvati’s twin and shook hands with Terry Boot, a sturdy Ravenclaw boy. “Nice to meet you,” Terry said. “I mean, for real. I’ve seen you in the halls and all, but we’ve never actually been introduced.”

“Is your gran’s name Sue Robertson?” Harry asked, suddenly recalling why Terry’s name seemed familiar.

Terry stared at him in surprise. “How’d you know?”

“Moony – that’s Mr. Lupin, he’s one of my guardians – he’s a friend of hers. They’ve gone out to tea a couple of times. And we met her at King’s Cross the day we left for school, she said your mum was putting you on the train.”

“She took me to the trial,” Terry said as Professor Flitwick assigned Ron to work with Hermione. “When Sirius Black got off. That was the first time I saw you, when Professor McGonagall Untransfigured you. What was it like, being an animal?”

“Not all that different from being human. Four feet, no hands, sharper teeth – Hermione was lucky, she got claws. Other than that, not too different.”

“And – you can tell me to shut up if you want to.”

“No, go on.”

“All right. What’s it like, living with Sirius Black? I mean, really?”

Harry shrugged. “What’s it like living with your dad?”

Terry looked at the floor. "My dad's dead," he said quietly. "He died in the war."

Harry winced. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't know." Terry looked up. "And you didn't answer the question either."

"It's..." Harry sighed. "I guess what I'm trying to say is it's no different than living with anyone else. I have a family. It's a little bigger than most people's families – two mums and two dads – but it's just about the same every other way. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it makes sense. But..."

"What?"

"I guess I was hoping for something exciting. Like he locks you in your room and doesn't feed you or something."

Harry would have been mad, except that Terry's expression made it obvious he was joking. "Only on Tuesdays," he answered, returning Terry's grin.

Professor Flitwick clapped his hands. "All right, class, one partner from each pair come up and get a feather, and then to work!"

"Did you have to show me up in front of everyone?" Ron groused at Hermione while they waited for their turn at the door of the Charms classroom.

"That's a stupid question," answered Draco before Hermione could say anything. "Of course she did."

"If she didn't, she wouldn't be Hermione Granger-Lupin, know-it-all extraordinaire," Harry finished.

"Oh, shut it, both of you," Hermione snapped. "You're just jealous because none of you could get your feather any higher than a foot."

“And you got it four feet up on your first try,” said Ron enviously. “How do you do that, anyway?”

“How do you eat enough food for three normal people?”

“I do not!”

“You do so!”

“If you don’t watch out, Ron’s going to take your place as Hermione’s number one person to fight with,” Harry said to Draco as they descended the stairs toward the Great Hall, the pair under discussion a few feet in front of them, quarrelling loudly and the subject of many interested looks from passing students and portraits hanging on the walls.

“He’s welcome to it. I’ll even teach him my spit shield spell.”

“You know a spit shield spell?”

“No, but I wish I did. Do you think Madam Pomfrey could do something about Hermione’s teeth?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe, but she’d have to have permission from Danger or Moony. And Hermione would have to want it.”

“And that would mean Hermione would have to admit there was some area in which she was less than perfect.”

The boy-cubs looked at each other.

“Not happening,” they said together, and cracked up laughing.

A screech came from around the corner Ron and Hermione had just turned. Harry and Draco broke into a run, but skidded to a halt as Nearly Headless Nick emerged from the wall, looking a bit ruffled. “I believe I may have startled your sister,” he said, readjusting his head. “She has quite a set of lungs.”

“You should hear her if she sees a mouse,” said Draco.

"I heard that!" echoed around the corner.

"You were supposed to!" Draco yelled back.

"Will we see you at the feast, Sir Nicholas?" Harry asked as Draco disappeared around the corner.

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of missing it. I understand the Charms Club has a special entertainment planned..."

The special entertainment consisted of turning the hair of every person in the school orange and black striped in honor of the holiday. Hermione thought it looked as if someone had swapped half the hair on Harry's and Ron's heads.

"Look," Draco said, pointing at the High Table, "they've done Dumbledore's beard in plaid."

"Sprout's got a pumpkin pattern in her hair," said Neville.

"And I think I see just a little orange on a certain Potions Master," said Harry gleefully. "Wait till he turns his head – there, d'you see it?"

Hermione giggled. There was, indeed, just a fleck of orange on the back of Snape's greasy head. "Happy Halloween," she said, raising her goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Happy Halloween," answered her brothers and friends, raising their goblets in answer.

Five goblets were drained.

About fifteen minutes later, Hermione felt the result.

"I'll be back in a minute," she said, laying down her fork in her mostly-eaten shepherd's pie.

"Where're you going?" asked Ron with his mouth full. The hair charm had mostly worn off by now, leaving everyone just a touch speckled.

Hermione gave him the full benefit of the Granger-Lupin glare. "The ladies' room."

Ron blushed.

Honestly, the nerve of some people, Hermione thought irritably as she left the Great Hall.

The ground floor girls' bathroom was nearby, for Hogwarts, which still meant a fairly brisk three-minute walk. Hermione was grateful it wasn't any longer.

She didn't have a book with her (You? Without a book? I think I'm going to faint! Draco's most innocent tones echoed in her mind), but the graffiti on the inside of the stall made for interesting reading.

"Snape needs to drown in his own cauldron." Can I help?

"Join the 'I Kicked Mrs. Norris' Club today!" Don't I just wish...

"MFT loves TMR." I wonder who they are. Or were. It looks old.

She flushed the toilet, unlocked the stall, and opened the door.

And froze in terror.

Her Pack-pendant chilled against her chest.

Something which looked like a mound of moving stone in overalls, and smelled like Padfoot's week-old socks, had just shuffled into the bathroom.

Troll, the portion of her mind that wasn't paralyzed in fear recognized. Mountain troll. Stupid, mean, strong...

I should run.

The problem was, the troll was blocking the only entrance, which was also the only exit.

Wait. What if I went between its legs?

It was disgusting, but it was a solution.

Hermione gathered her courage and ran.

The troll bellowed as it spotted her, and swung its club downwards in a great arc, following her path between its legs.

Then it bellowed even louder.

Great, now it's hurting, which means it's mad. Have to run, have to run, get up and run...

Too busy looking over her shoulder for signs of the troll to watch where she was going, Hermione collided painfully with a suit of armor at one of the corners, knocking it (and herself) over, breaking it into its component parts, and making enough noise to signal anyone within three floors where she was. She started to get back up and yelped as her left ankle refused to take her weight.

Oh no, I must have twisted it, now I can't run, what am I going to do, somebody help me, somebody help me...

The troll rounded the corner, saw her, and roared, lumbering towards her.

"YAAAHHH!" yelled three voices in chorus.

The troll stopped dead, looking around in perplexity for the source of this new sound. As it turned sideways, two figures darted behind it – Draco and Ron. Hermione had never been so glad to see anyone in her life.

"Are you all right?" Draco demanded, dropping to his knees beside her.

"No, it's my ankle, I can't walk – where's Harry?"

A minor explosion went off on the other side of the troll, pulling its attention.

“There,” said Ron, snatching up a piece of the suit of armor and flinging it, missing the troll but hitting the wall with a loud clatter, making the troll look around again.

“Keep doing that!” Harry’s voice shouted. “Keep it distracted!”

Ron threw another piece at the wall deliberately, then another at the opposite wall, making the troll whip its head back and forth as it tried to find the source of the sounds. Then, suddenly, it was roaring and clawing at its face, doing what looked like a crazed dance in the hallway, and as it turned slightly Hermione saw why – Harry was clinging to the back of the troll’s head, his arms around its neck, and his wand had gone up its nose.

“Draco!” Harry yelled over the troll’s roars. “Get Hermione out of here!”

“But–”

“That’s an order!”

Draco growled slightly, then bent down and pulled Hermione to her feet, draping her arm over his shoulders. “Come on.”

Ron fired a furious barrage of armor to cover their retreat as they hobbled in awkward lockstep around the corner, down the hall, and through the door of the nearest secret passage, one place they were sure the troll couldn’t follow them.

“I knew we’d regret making him the alpha,” Draco grumbled, leaning against the stone wall.

“I hope they’ll be all right,” said Hermione anxiously. Her pendant was still cold against her skin, and she was sure if she pulled it out, the carving of the wolf cub would be glowing. “Where does this passage go?”

“I’m not sure, but we’d better follow it anyway. We need to get you to the hospital wing, and we definitely shouldn’t go back out there with a troll on the loose.”

Hermione almost balked at the sight of stairs part way through the passage – she had to go on hands and one foot the last flight and a half. “We’re much too high for the hospital wing,” Draco said at the top. “It’s only on the first floor – we must be at least on the fourth by now—”

Hermione pushed a tapestry aside, and they looked out into a corridor near the Charms classroom. “Not quite,” she said. “Third floor.”

“Ssh!” Draco said suddenly.

“Alohomora!” a man’s voice echoed down the hall. Then panicked screaming erupted, mingled with roaring not unlike that of the troll, only this was more growly, thought Hermione, listening in unwilling fascination. And there seemed to be more of it somehow...

A door slammed. “Compingo!” shouted another voice, this one highly enunciated, thoroughly familiar, and quite unwelcome. “Quirinus, you fool, what did you think you were doing?”

“S-S-Severus! Th-thank you, I had n-no idea... I m-merely wanted to be sure the t-t-troll hadn’t been some kind of d-d-diversion...”

“Oh, I’m quite sure you did,” said Snape icily. “Quite sure. And now you’ve seen what’s guarding it, haven’t you...”

“Th-three heads,” stammered the other man, who must be Professor Quirrell. “It’s m-magical...”

“No doubt. Shall I escort you to the hospital wing? You seem to have hurt yourself.” Snape’s voice oozed contempt.

“N-no, thank you, I th-think I can manage...”

“No, I insist.”

Draco and Hermione peered through the tapestry to see Snape and Quirrell come around the corner, Quirrell pale under his purple turban and limping somewhat on one foot. Snape's face was even more sour than usual – he looked as if he'd been chewing on a lemon, Hermione thought, carefully stifling a laugh.

"Three heads?" Draco murmured when the teachers had rounded the corner.

"It must be the forbidden corridor," said Hermione suddenly. "Third floor, right hand side – yes, it is! It's whatever didn't show up on the Map – that's what has three heads, that's what was growling!"

Draco frowned. "Wait a minute. Mrs. Norris shows up on the Map, doesn't she?"

Hermione nodded.

"But she's not a person. She's just a cat. So if whatever's on the other side of that door is alive, it should show up on the Map too. Why didn't it?"

Hermione swallowed. "I don't know." The thought that maybe the Marauder's Map wasn't the infallible resource they had thought it was worried her. "But I think we have to see whatever's behind that door for ourselves."

"Are you crazy?" Draco hissed. "You can't even walk! It'd get us for sure!"

"I never said we should open the door. Doors have keyholes, don't they?"

"Let me make sure I'm hearing this right. Hermione Granger-Lupin is encouraging me to break the rules?"

"Not break. Just bend. And I am a Marauder's daughter. What were you expecting?"

Draco groaned. "Fine. You win. Come on."

The locked door wasn't hard to find. Hermione slid into a sitting position against the opposite wall as Draco bent to peer through the keyhole. "It's blocked," he said. "Someone's blocked it up, I can't see anything..."

"Move over." Hermione aimed her wand at the hole. "Waddiwasi!" A piece of used chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and plastered itself to the wall beside her. "Probably Peeves," she said, putting her wand away.

Draco knelt down and applied his eye to the keyhole again.

"Well?" Hermione prompted when the silence grew too long for her to stand.

"Dog," Draco said shortly.

"With three heads?"

"Yeah, it's pretty scary-looking – hold on a second—" Draco got to his feet, angling his eye downward through the small hole. "There's something in the floor. Looks like... a handle. Might be a trapdoor."

"Now you've seen what's guarding it," Hermione murmured. "Guarding what?"

"I don't know," Draco said, standing up. "But we have to get out of here. A teacher could be along any minute. All aboard, next stop hospital wing."

Danger and Sirius were practicing their newest sport – partner pacing. It could be done either in parallel or contrary motion. At the moment, they were displaying classic contrary motion style, though Sirius, with his longer stride, showed a tendency to creep up on Danger, threatening to overtake her at any time...

If partner pacing is our sport, performing silliness in a serious way is yours.

Remus spread his hands. What can I say to the truth?

Danger rolled her shoulders without breaking stride. I hope they're going to be all right.

They should be. It didn't look bad – no blood, no broken limbs – I have a feeling the worst either of them will have suffered is a mild concussion. Harry's not in danger of dying, that we know, and he and Ron appear to have been hurt about the same...

I wonder if anyone thought to notify Molly.

She may have seen it on her clock... Remus looked up. Ah-ha.

Darn werewolf senses. Ah-ha what?

Redheads at three o'clock.

What should I do until then?

Instead of dignifying this with an answer, Remus stood up from his place beside the door as Molly and Ginny Weasley came into view, both breathing fairly hard. "Yours too," Molly said. "I should have known. What were they into?"

"As I understand it, they went looking for a troll that got into the school somehow and got themselves flattened," Sirius said in annoyance. Molly groaned. Ginny looked intrigued.

"I'm sure they had a good reason," said Remus calmly.

"A good reason?" Danger was more than a little annoyed. She stared at the closed door to the hospital wing, which also happened to be the general direction of her Pack-brother. "A good reason to almost get themselves killed? If Lockhart hadn't been as close as he was..."

"Don't yell at me," Sirius protested. "I didn't do it."

And probably for the first time in his life, that's the truth, Remus noted.

Two slim, dark fingers were pressed firmly against Ron Weasley's pale neck. The other small hand held a watch. The grey eyes were fixed on its dial.

"Sixty-four," Meghan said, looking up at her mother and Madam Pomfrey.

The nurse held out her hand for the watch and checked Ron's pulse herself. "Very good," she said in approval. "Try Mr. Potter now."

Meghan trotted decorously around the bed, her usual boisterous movements curtailed in the sober environment of the hospital wing. After fifteen seconds timing Harry's pulse, she closed her eyes in thought for a moment, then announced that his was sixty-eight.

"Returning to normal, excellent. Can you find the Gentle Revival Draft for me? It's on the second shelf from the floor, on your left as you go in the door, in a tall, thin, green bottle. Thank you, dear. She's so helpful," Madam Pomfrey said to Aletha as Meghan vanished through the office door. "And she's only seven, or is it eight?"

"She was eight in June."

"I must say, I was a bit leery about allowing her to remain in here with you, but you insisted, and I'm so glad you did – she's been so very quiet, so observant – does she show any interest in Healing as a career?"

Aletha shrugged as nonchalantly as she could. "It's early to be thinking of that, isn't it?"

"Nonsense, it's never too early to be thinking of things. As I recall, you once thought of a career in Healing yourself – whatever became of that?"

Aletha sighed. "It didn't agree with me. I decided to do something a bit less challenging. Secretarial work suited me well. Then, after everything happened, I became a full-time housewife and part-time music teacher, and that's where I'm content to stay." Please, please, just stop asking – it's hard enough dealing with my old troubles when

I see Meghan interested in Healing, without all these damn questions making it worse...

Meghan emerged from the office with the potion bottle in her hand just as Harry stirred, and the conversation was effectively over.

What if Meghan did decide to become a Healer or a mediwitch? Could I live with that?

Aletha heard Molly Weasley's voice outside the room, and the cold feeling at the pit of her stomach redoubled.

And what if Molly finds out what happened?

She sighed. Here we go again with secrets...

The noise in the corridor suddenly doubled for a moment, with Danger's voice making itself heard above the rest: "Draco! Hermione! Are you all right?"

Aletha slipped out of the room, leaving Madam Pomfrey and Meghan to take care of the two boys.

Draco was submitting to being ferociously hugged by Danger, and Remus was holding Hermione like an oversized baby in his arms. "She's twisted her ankle," he said to Aletha, seeing her looking. "Draco's all right."

"How are the boys?" asked Molly anxiously.

"They have mild concussions, nothing serious. They're waking up right now."

Everyone relaxed visibly. "Good," Danger said. "Then I can go throw Harry out the window."

"You need a new threat," said Remus.

"Fine, I'll throw you out the window."

“That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Should have been more specific, then.”

The door creaked open. “You can all come in now,” Meghan announced solemnly. “But you have to stay quiet.”

Remus, carrying Hermione, was first through the door. Madam Pomfrey clucked over her and sent Meghan off for another potion from her office. Sirius went straight to the bed containing the dark-haired boy and Molly to the one with the redhead. Aletha laughed as she heard the identical first words out of their mouths:

“What were you thinking?”

“Huh?” was Ron’s response. Aletha smiled and tuned that half of the room out in favor of her own Pack.

“What happened?” Harry asked, looking around in confusion.

“You got your head bashed in by a troll, that’s what happened,” Sirius said, sounding almost angry, though Aletha knew at least half of what he was feeling was actually fear. The expression on his face when the pendants went cold – God, I hope I never see it again...

But she knew she was likely to see it far too many times over the next years.

“Why in the world would you do something that harebrained?” Danger was asking now.

“I remember... going looking for the troll,” said Harry, screwing up his face. “Hermione was in trouble, we had to find her. And then... nothing.” He looked around at his Pack-parents in sudden panic. “Is she all right? Did it get her?”

“I’m fine,” Hermione called from the other end of the ward. “I twisted my ankle, that’s all.”

"We did find her," said Draco, joining the group around Harry's bed. "You ordered me to get her away. The last I saw, you and Ron were throwing things at the troll. What happened then?"

Harry shook his head, wincing slightly at the movement. "I... don't remember."

"Perfectly normal," Madam Pomfrey said, bustling over. "Concussions can cause mild memory loss, nothing to worry about. You and Mr. Weasley will have to stay overnight, Mr. Potter, just in case of complications, but that's highly unlikely."

"Can we have a little time with Harry before he goes to bed?" Remus asked. "It's something of a special night for us."

"Would you like to be private?"

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea."

Screens were appropriately drawn, and the Pack gathered around Harry's bed.

"It's days like this that make me wonder if there really is such a thing as Fate," Sirius began. "With my thinking tending towards yes. I was absolutely petrified when my pendant went cold. I'd be scared any day that someone I love was in 'mortal peril', but this day in particular. It's ten years tonight since my world fell apart."

Harry looked suddenly very ashamed of himself as Sirius went on. "Since then, I've managed – with a lot of help – to put it back together. But I was terrified today that Fate had decided, for one reason or another, that Sirius Black didn't deserve this much happiness, and was going to start taking it apart again."

"This is why I love you," said Aletha, smiling wryly at her husband. "You can take anything and make it all about you. But I suppose everyone does that, to some extent. You three," she turned to Harry, Draco, and Hermione, the two who were not actually in the bed sitting on it, "scared me out of my wits today. Don't do it again."

“You dishonor your parents’ memory by risking your life foolishly, Harry,” said Remus quietly. “Please be more careful.”

A tinge of rebellion crept onto Harry’s face. “We had to,” he said defensively. “We had to find Hermione – she was in trouble–”

“Next time, tell a teacher,” Danger said emphatically. “Don’t – please don’t – go running off on what looks like adventures. Adventures are only enjoyable to read or hear about after they’re over. While they’re happening, they’re scary, messy, and painful. I speak from experience.”

“And I think that’s enough scolding for one night,” Remus concluded. “How was the feast?”

The Pack talked for nearly an hour, and only left when Madam Pomfrey ejected them, at the same time as she told Molly Weasley and Ginny to leave. Ginny waved good night to the cubs as she passed. Harry waved back, and Ginny turned quickly away.

“Somebody likes you,” Draco sing-songed, grinning.

Harry whomped his brother with his pillow.

Ginny does not like me. And even if she did, why should I care?

“Draco?”

“Yeah?”

“Could you see if Madam Pomfrey’ll let you get something for me and come back?”

“What do you want?”

“My photo album.”

Madam Pomfrey looked skeptical, but allowed it, and Draco hurried out of the hospital wing and returned ten minutes later with Harry’s red-leather-bound album.

“Thanks,” Harry said, accepting it. “Good night.”

“Night, Harry. ’Night, Ron.”

“Night,” Ron called from his bed.

Harry opened the book to the first page. James and Lily Potter waved up at him, Lily occasionally taking hold of baby Harry’s hand to make him wave too.

I’m sorry, Harry told his parents silently. I won’t do it again. I promise.

Unfortunately, it was a promise he would find difficult, if not impossible, to keep.

(A/N: Remember, in the universe of J.K. Rowling, what you think happened is not always what really happened...

If you reviewed the “mock” chapter 5 and can’t review this, feel free to leave me a message on Yahoo group! Even if you have reviewed (and if you haven’t, please do), pop over to Yahoo and see if there’s a discussion going, and if there isn’t, why not start one?)

Chapter 6: Coming to Terms

Aletha sat in her bedroom at the Den, staring out the window. She held a quill in her hand, but she hadn't dipped it into the ink yet, and the parchment in front of her remained unmarked.

How can I possibly write this to her?

But how could I tell her to her face?

God, if I'd only realized when we first met who she was...

But what could I have done then, when we were still hiding? Deny the cubs their friendship with Ron and Ginny because of something that happened almost before they were born?

The door creaked. She looked around. "Oh."

"'Oh'? Whatever happened to 'Hello, nice to see you, come here so I can kiss you'? Or is the magic fading already? It's only been, what, nine years?" Sirius shut the door, crossed the room, and sat down on the edge of their bed closest to her.

"Sirius, I'm really not in the mood for this."

"I can see that. What's wrong?"

"I don't want to talk about it." Aletha got up and started walking toward the door.

Sirius crawled across the bed and swung himself off it in time to intercept her. "Why not?"

Aletha folded her arms. "Don't push me right now."

"Don't make me push you then. Tell me what's going on."

"No."

"All right, have it your way." Sirius stepped aside.

“Thank you.” Aletha reached for the door handle to let herself out of the bedroom.

The door was locked.

“This isn’t funny,” she said, reaching for her wand.

“Expelliarmus!”

Aletha staggered forward a pace with the force of the spell, just catching herself with her left hand as her wand flew from her right. “What are you doing?” she demanded, whirling around in time to see Sirius catch her wand and stow it in his pocket. He had his own out, and it was not quite pointed at her, but she knew how fast it could turn her way.

“You’re being irrational. You used to slap me around when I got that way, back in London. Not physically – usually – but I do seem to recall one or two episodes where you took my wand away.”

“You were saying stupid things about being a bad person and not deserving to live. I’m just in a bad mood. It’s not the same.”

“You’ve been in a bad mood more or less continuously for a week. Since Halloween. This has to stop. Are you aware that Meghan thinks you hate her?”

“What?”

“I found her this morning in Danger’s arms, crying and asking why her Mama Letha didn’t love her anymore.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe, but it’s true. Ever since Halloween, you’ve been completely on edge around her. And around everyone else. You shouted at Remus yesterday – you never shout at him. And you provoked him into shouting back, which also never happens. You’re affecting everyone, Letha, and whatever it is, you need to get it under control.”

"I have it under control."

Sirius coughed into his hand, making a sound suspiciously like "bovine manure".

"Even if I don't, I'll handle it myself. Without your so-called 'help'." She made sneer quotes in the air with her fingers. "Now, if you wouldn't mind unlocking this door so I can go tell my daughter I don't hate her..."

"With that look on your face, she wouldn't believe you."

Aletha snorted angrily. "So what are you planning on doing? Keeping us both locked in here until I tell you what's going on?"

"If necessary."

"Fine. I can last as long as you can. Probably longer."

"Probably true. So I'll have to go to Plan B. Wingardium Leviosa."

Aletha carefully refrained from squealing or otherwise making noise as her feet left the ground. It's what he wants. She contented herself with glaring bloody murder at her husband as he levitated her to the bed, turned her horizontal, and set her down on it. "And what exactly is this going to do? Unless you're planning on tying me down, I'll just get up again."

"I wasn't planning on tying you down, but you're not getting up again."

"Why not?"

Instead of answering, Sirius climbed onto the bed beside her.

"Going to try and kiss me better? Not going to work. Not this time."

"I know. That's why I wasn't going to try it."

Just then, Aletha noticed that he wasn't orienting himself the same way she was oriented. Instead, he was at right angles to her...

Before she could react, he had draped himself across her midriff, his stomach resting on her hips, effectively pinning her where she was, since he outweighed her by a significant margin.

"Why – you – I – let me up!"

"No."

"Yes!" Aletha squirmed, but she was trapped. "I'll bite," she threatened.

"I'll tickle."

"I'll tickle back."

"In that case, I will tie you up. At least your hands."

She snarled. "I hate you."

"At least you're being open about it with me. Covert warfare's hard on an eight-year-old."

"I do NOT hate Meghan!"

"Then what is wrong with you? Why have you been edging around her and snapping at her every time she makes a sound for a week?"

"I..." Aletha made a sound half growl, half sigh. "Now I know how you used to feel when you'd have a nightmare and Remus would force you to tell us what it was about."

"Have you been having nightmares? You haven't been sleeping well, I know."

"No, I have not been having nightmares – but I probably will now that you've brought it up. Thank you so very much."

“You started it.”

Aletha disdained to reply.

“I was trying to think if I’d ever seen you like this before,” Sirius said conversationally, as if he were remarking on the weather. “One time came to mind. Right after Harry was born, when the war was really getting nasty...”

Aletha tried to stop herself stiffening, but she couldn’t help it entirely.

“Ah-ha. I’ve got something there, haven’t I.”

“No.” Her voice squeaked slightly on the negative.

“Yes. Let me think. What was going on around then?”

“Stop. You’re wrong.”

“If I were wrong, you wouldn’t care. I’m right. Aren’t I?”

Aletha took a breath to deny it again, then realized it would do no good. Sirius knew her too well – he had her trapped, verbally as well as physically. “Yes.”

“All right. Around the time Harry was born. You weren’t there when it actually happened – you were away on some kind of mission...”

Aletha flinched again. Whatever happened to my control? I used to be able to handle this kind of thing, I used to be able to stay calm through anything and not give my secrets away...

“That mission. That’s what has you tied up in knots. What could possibly have happened eleven years ago that’s got you so worked up now?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“As long as it was just your problem, that was true. But not any more. This is affecting me, Meghan, and the rest of the Pack. So it’s bloody

well become my business, and you'd better get used to that and start talking, because I'm just going to keep guessing until I get it right if you don't."

"If I say I'm going to start talking, will you let me up?"

"The way you've been acting, you're going to need to swear."

"Whatever happened to trust between husband and wife?"

"Whatever happened to affection between mother and daughter?"

"You keep hammering on that. I have not been that bad to Meghan."

"Oh yes you have. Jumping on her for every little thing she does wrong, spying on her when she's playing – and what about that little outburst the other day? She was just asking when we'd go to Hogwarts again. You know perfectly well she didn't mean anything about any of the other cubs getting hurt, and it was wrong of you to imply she did. What is going on here?"

He's learned a few things from Remus. That was a damned good impression of an alpha. "Get off me and I'll tell you."

"Swear?"

Aletha thought rapidly. "On my mother's grave."

Sirius started to lift himself up, then stopped. "Nice try."

"What?"

"Your mother wasn't buried. She was cremated. So she doesn't have a grave, does she."

Aletha growled. "No."

"Try again."

"I hate you."

“You’ve said that.”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

“Then I’m not getting up. It’s very comfortable here.”

Aletha glared at him. “Do you have a suggestion for what I could swear by that will satisfy you, Your Highness?”

“Swear by your music. That I’ll believe.”

“Fine. You win. I swear by my music I’ll tell you what’s going on. Now will you let me up?”

“Yes.” Sirius climbed off her and lay down next to her, propping himself on an elbow. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Which is not now.” Aletha turned over, facing away from him.

“Hoy, that’s cheating!”

“No, I swore I’d tell you. I didn’t say when.”

“Are you going to get legalistic on me?”

If it’ll keep this story from getting out, yes. She took a breath to tell him so –

And the memories rushed back on her. Helpless, watching the battle, and not being able to do anything – and then, when she had been released, when she should have acted –

She was shivering, knees drawn up to her chest, her breath coming in shaky gasps.

I did nothing. I hesitated.

And because I did, they died... and if Meghan becomes a Healer, it could happen again, it could happen to her...

I will not condemn my daughter to that kind of pain.

So instead you'd deny her what she obviously wants?

Aletha jumped. Several highly rude words came to her mind. Now you're even spying on my thoughts?

You were so lost in them, you never even noticed me putting my chain on you. And whatever this is, it needs to be dealt with. NOW. Before it poisons one more moment with that sweet little girl-cub of ours, or with our Packmates or the other cubs, or anyone else we care about.

You are aware this is the equivalent of forcing you to relive Azkaban?

If I had to do that to make me fit to stay with the Pack, I'd at least give it a try. And you won't be alone. His arm slid over her, promising strength and comfort. I promised to stand by you for better or for worse. But I can't do that if I don't know what the 'worse' is.

Aletha's shoulders slumped. Since you're obviously not taking no for an answer...

Damn straight.

Let me go? Just for a second?

All right. Sirius released her. How come?

If you're going to make me do this, I'm at least going to do it comfortably.

Works for me.

Aletha turned over and found her usual place, head resting against Sirius' collarbone, his arm under her neck, her face against his chest. He leaned his head down and kissed the top of hers.

So you remember July of 1980, she began. You remember what we were all doing then.

Let's see. James and I had just finished Auror training. Lily was a bit busy, what with being nearly nine months pregnant. Remus was traveling a lot, getting in touch with werewolves and other nominally Dark creatures, trying to persuade them to our side or at least to stay neutral. And you were halfway through Healer training – that's four years, where Auror is only three...

That's right. About three days before Lily's due date, Dumbledore had a talk with me.

Aletha closed her eyes and allowed the memory to sweep over them both.

They stood in the corner of a small office-like room, watching Dumbledore, behind the desk piled high with scrolls, looking gravely at a much younger Aletha, who looked stunned and highly unhappy. "A mission? Now? But sir—"

"I know. You had hoped to assist Lily and Alice when they gave birth. I had hoped you might be able to as well. But a situation in Scotland has come to my attention which cannot be ignored."

The younger Aletha sighed. "All right, sir. What is it?"

Dumbledore pulled out a scroll and handed it to her. "There are rumors of a colony of Hebridean Black dragons being magically trained to attack Muggle suburbs with fire."

Aletha's face showed confusion. "But – I'm no good with dragons. What can I do?"

"I am sending Gideon and Fabian Prewett to investigate the situation. If there are indeed dragons, whether or not there are also Death Eaters training them, injuries are likely. They will need a Healer with them, and you are the most qualified current Order member."

"But I'm only half-trained—"

“Which is more training than anyone else in this Order at the moment. You may make the difference between life and death. Will you go?”

Aletha straightened proudly. “Yes, sir.”

The memory faded.

You were with the Prewetts? I never knew that.

I know. There’s a reason. Aletha swallowed bitterness. You won’t like this.

Just go on.

We went north. Walking and hitchhiking, acting like Muggle backpackers. I played Gideon’s girlfriend, with Fabian the little brother being dragged along to give us at least the semblance of being chaperoned. It took us a bit over two weeks to get near the site Dumbledore had given us. And I have to say I enjoyed myself on the trip. You remember the Prewetts.

They were a lot of fun. Fabian played the guitar. Gideon was always cracking jokes. Do you remember the time he and James and I got into a bad joke contest? Sirius stopped. I’m hurting you, I can feel it. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. His tone was puzzled. What’s wrong?

Tears of sorrow and frustration and shame were starting to sting Aletha’s eyes. It was a trap, Sirius. There were no dragons. There was nothing there. Just five Death Eaters, waiting for us. They knew we were coming, they knew exactly when and where.

Sirius growled. Wormtail.

It must have been. He may even have planted the information about the dragons to begin with. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that they ambushed us, and we were caught completely and totally by surprise. One of them got me with a Body-Bind first thing. I didn’t even have time to try to dodge.

So you had to watch. Sirius held her closer. I’m so sorry. It must have been terrible for you, not being able to help them.

She forced the words out. Even thinking them was an effort. That wasn't the worst.

Then what –

The memory she'd been trying to avoid rushed over them both.

"Give it up, boy, you'll never make it," taunted a masked figure, just visible from behind a boulder. Fabian Prewett was hunched on the ground, one arm pressed against his side awkwardly, at an unnatural angle. Gideon lay nearby. From her vantage point, Aletha knew that her younger, Petrified self could just see his chest rising and falling.

He's not dead yet. The thoughts of that unmoving girl came clearly to the ears of the Aletha who was watching from a nearby rock, with Sirius standing beside her. I could save him, if I could just get to him... if I could just move! Her frustration was hot enough to light a fire, but the spell binding her was rock-solid.

"Maybe I... won't," Fabian panted out. "But... your friends won't... either." He jerked his head toward the nearby ground, on which four bodies lay, faces covered with masks. "And – Reducto!"

The Reductor Curse blasted away a corner of the rock behind which the Death Eater hid. He dodged quickly to the other side of the rock, and Fabian lurched to his feet. "Stupefy!"

The Stunner hit the Death Eater's now exposed shoulder, and he dropped where he stood. Fabian staggered, but turned painstakingly around, pointed his wand at Aletha, and said something inaudible.

Then he collapsed.

"What did—" Sirius began, but stopped as the younger Aletha moved. "Of course, he countered the Petrificus. Stupid me."

"Just watch," said Aletha, forcing herself to do the same. This is my shame. This is the worst moment of my life. But if I try to forget, it will only come back and haunt me again and again. It's already begun.

The young Aletha was clearly in a quandary. She ran to Fabian and checked his pulse, then turned to Gideon and did the same, then hovered between them a moment. Her dilemma was obvious. Two badly hurt men, both of whom needed her help – but she couldn't help them both...

"And I helped neither of them," muttered Aletha as her younger self made up her mind and began working frantically on Gideon.

"What are you talking about?" Sirius asked. "Look, there you are, helping them right now."

"It's not going to do any good! Or don't you remember?"
They were back in the bedroom.

Don't I remember what?

They died, Sirius! They both died! Because of me!

What do you mean, because of you? If there was nothing you could do, that doesn't make it your fault that they died...

There was something. Or there should have been. I should have, I could have saved at least one of them. But by the time I made up my mind which of them to treat, it was too late. I hesitated, Sirius. You saw it. I hesitated, and because I did, they both died! They died, when I could have saved them!

The tears escaped her now. Hot and painful, they overflowed her eyes and spilled down her face and soaked into Sirius' shirt, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

Sirius simply held her until the worst of it was over. This is probably really horrible of me, he said quietly. But a very wise woman once told me that could have, would have, and should have all add up to the same thing. Didn't.

Astonishment at his sheer gall in repeating her own words back to her overwhelmed her anger and annoyance at it, and she laughed, weakly. You are aware I should probably try to kill you for that.

I'd really appreciate it if you didn't.

So now you know. I Apparated back to Headquarters after I'd lost them both. The bitterness in her mouth returned full-force. Any Healer hated to lose a patient, but to lose two at the same time, and through her own carelessness and bungling, was inexcusable. I told Dumbledore what had happened. He sent people north to get them – their bodies – and collect the Death Eaters. And I told him I was quitting the Healer's program. He tried to argue me out of it, but I wouldn't budge.

I remember thinking there was something wrong with your line about "Healing doesn't agree with me anymore". But we needed someone in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – someone who wouldn't be noticeable rummaging through parchments, that is. And I must say, from a personal standpoint, I certainly didn't mind having you around. But if I'd known that was why you'd left the program...

You didn't. No one did, except Dumbledore. That was the way I wanted it.

I can understand that. Sirius' tone changed subtly, becoming ever so faintly sardonic. So let me see if I have this straight. You're under the impression that Gideon and Fabian Prewett died because you hesitated, and because of that, you gave up on your dream and want to keep Meghan away from hers?

Aletha pulled away sharply, standing up on the floor and yanking Sirius' chain from her neck. "How dare you," she hissed. "How dare you couch it like that. You weren't there. You didn't have to feel them die under your hands, and know – know – that even a second less of your stupid hesitation would have saved them!"

Sirius was on his feet as well. "Don't play can't-understand with me, Aletha, it's not going to work. You know perfectly well whose blood is on my hands. Maybe I wasn't there, maybe I didn't see it happen, but I've dreamed of it and thought about it and been haunted by it anyway for ten damn years. And I spend my time trying to make up

for it – even though I know I never can – not trying to run away from it.”

“Are you calling me a coward?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then say so.” They were in each other’s faces, eyes locked and glaring. “Say it to me, in so many words. Right here, right now.”

Sirius took a breath, paused, and let it out again in a sigh. “No,” he said on the tail end of it. “No. I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?” Aletha was furious, perhaps more at his refusal than she would have been had he done it.

“I mean I won’t help you beat yourself up over this. Circe’s hair, Letha, you were only twenty, and a Healer-trainee, not even halfway through your training yet. You should never have been in a situation like that in the first place.”

“It was a war. Wars don’t give you much choice.”

“True. But Meghan – I hope – will have her choice. If you were going to force her to become a Healer, then you could say you were ‘condemning’ her to something.” Sirius made rather clumsy air quotes around the word.

Men just don’t do good air quotes...

“But you’re not. It’s her wish, at least right now. And don’t forget, almost no one actually grows up to be what they think they want to be when they’re eight. When I was eight, I wanted to be either a dragon tamer or – get ready for this one – a werewolf hunter.”

The absurdity of this in light of their present surroundings broke through Aletha’s mood and surprised a laugh from her. “Healing was the only job I ever really thought seriously about,” she confessed. “Before I went to Hogwarts, I wanted to be a doctor or a veterinary.

When I found out about magical Healing, I read everything I could about it.”

“What about your music?”

“I never thought of that as a job, really. It was just something I did because... because I had to, I suppose.”

Sirius frowned in confusion. “Because you had to?”

“Not the someone-making-me kind of had-to,” Aletha clarified. “More along the lines of, if I didn’t, I felt strange and wrong, as if I hadn’t eaten or slept for too long. Over the years, music’s become almost a necessity for me. Like writing is for you. I’ve seen you on days when we have too much to do to let you get at your work for a while. You get irritable and fidgety.”

“I think I can sympathize with your experience carrying Meghan,” Sirius said ruefully. “The story kicks at the inside of my head until I let it out.”

“At least you don’t gain weight with it. I must have gained three stone while I was pregnant, and I’m not sure I’ve lost all of it yet.”

Sirius looked her up and down. “Looks all right to me.”

Aletha chuckled. “Flatterer.” Then she frowned. “Weren’t we angry with each other just about a minute ago?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Just checking.” She stepped closer to him. “I want to make sure it counts as making up when I do this.” She pulled his head down and kissed him.

“I’d take it even if it weren’t,” Sirius said dreamily when they let go. “Do that again.”

All in all, Aletha thought, it was a good thing the door was already locked.

There's another part to this, Aletha said nearly an hour later, when they were back to simply holding one another and being together. Do you remember how Gideon could cook?

Yes. He was almost a genius. He didn't do fancy dishes, but he could make the most amazing things taste wonderful – just plain things you'd been eating all your life and thought you knew exactly what they tasted like, he could make them new again.

And he always used to claim his big sister taught him everything he knew.

That's right. His big sister Molly... Sirius stopped. Oh, no.

Oh, yes. Fabian was a redhead, if you recall. And the resemblance is there, if you look.

That does make things more difficult, doesn't it.

Only in private could Aletha allow herself foolish and stereotypical feminine shows of weakness, like hiding her face against her husband's shirt. No matter how good it felt, it wasn't the right demeanor in public. Not even when he put his arm around her in that way she knew meant he was ready to fight off anything that threatened her...

Yes, she answered belatedly. It does.

Three days later, Aletha sat in the kitchen of the Burrow, facing Molly Weasley. She had taken advantage of the more-or-less permanent invitations to tea that existed between the Weasleys and the Pack, she had made sure Molly didn't have anywhere else to be and that Ginny was out of the house, and then she had told the whole story.

The first words out of Molly's mouth shocked her.

"Thank you," the other woman said, although there were tears running down her cheeks. "You don't know what this means to me. To know that someone tried to help them – that they weren't alone or abandoned – you could say they were my first babies, you know, I was as much a mother hen when I was a girl as I am now – thank you,

Aletha. Thank you so much.” She sniffled a bit, then took another look at Aletha’s face. “Gracious, what’s the matter?”

“I... guess I’m a little surprised. I’d thought you’d be angry, or hurt...”

“About what? That you didn’t save them?” Molly shook her head, reaching across the table and taking Aletha’s hand in hers. “I suppose if you’d told me this the week after they died, or the month, or the year, I would have been angry. But time is a great healer. It can’t heal everything, but it does a surprisingly good job on many things.” She looked searchingly at Aletha. “You’ve never forgiven yourself, have you?”

Wordlessly, Aletha shook her head.

“No one can be perfect, Aletha. Least of all a twenty-year-old Healer-trainee scared out of her mind. You did try. I’ll never forget that. And I forgive you, for what that’s worth. Now you go and work on forgiving yourself. Go on, home with you. Shoo.”

Aletha allowed herself to be propelled, laughing but still with tears in her eyes, towards the Floo. Before she entered it, she turned and impulsively embraced Molly. The embrace was returned wholeheartedly.

“And I’ll be wanting stories about those two reprobates from all of you who knew them,” Molly said in Aletha’s ear.

“Gladly.”

Something I can do. Finally.

The weight she’d carried in her heart for so many years seemed a little lighter.

“Ooooh, my head,” Danger groaned theatrically. “I bumped it terribly on the brick wall when I tapped the wrong brick to open Diagon Alley. Healer, can you help me?”

“Let me see,” said Meghan briskly, opening her Healer’s bag. “I have just the thing. A Headache Potion.” She handed Danger one of her

many play vials. "Drink it all very quickly and your headache will go away."

Danger opened the top and pretended to drink the contents, then made a face. "This tastes horrible."

"If it didn't taste horrible, how would you know it was a potion?" Meghan questioned pertly.

"Healer, Healer, help me!" Sirius clung to the doorframe. "My leg, it's my leg."

"Here, sit down." Meghan pulled one of the chairs over for him. "What happened to your leg?" she asked, examining the rather hairy appendage extended for her perusal.

"My friend kicked it after I called him a nasty name."

"Well, then it's your own fault, isn't it now. But I'll still help you." Meghan pulled out two or three vials and a bandage from her bag, soaked the bandage in the pretend contents of the vials, then tied it tightly around her father's leg.

"Loosen it up a bit, Pearl, my foot's falling asleep," Sirius said.

"Don't argue with the Healer," said Meghan in a prissy voice, but she undid the knot and rewound the bandage a bit looser.

"Healers don't like that," Remus agreed from the doorway. "I've just been feeling a bit off-color recently, Healer. Can you help me?"

Meghan did a thorough examination of Remus, peering into his eyes and ears, making him say "Ah", even jumping on him from behind to see how he reacted. "You can't do that when you're a real Healer," Remus warned her, peeling her off him.

Meghan stuck out her tongue at him. "I can if I want to."

"No, you can't," Remus said sternly, tapping the side of Meghan's neck with two fingers.

Meghan pouted, but nodded, and the next second was back into her game. "You're a werewolf, Mister, so you'd better stay inside at the full moon, and don't bite anybody. And stay away from silver, unless you know a werewolf tamer."

"Stay inside, don't bite, no silver," Remus muttered as he took pretend notes on his hand. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. No more kicking my Dadfoot."

"Not even if he calls me nasty names?"

"What kind of nasty names?"

Remus whispered in her ear. Meghan's eyes got big, and she ran over and pretended, in slow motion, to kick Sirius, who grabbed his shin in mock agony. "Ow! Whose side are you on?"

"The same side she's always on," chuckled Danger from the couch where she was lying, "recovering from her headache". "The side that allows her to have the most fun."

Aletha came hurrying in from the kitchen, all smiles, with a piece of parchment in her hand. "Letter from Hogwarts!" she announced, putting an abrupt end to the game as everyone gathered around to hear the letter read aloud.

Dear everyone,

Draco's in trouble.

I am not!

You have detention with Snape tomorrow. I think that counts.

Well, I don't deserve it.

Sorry about that. They grabbed it away from me. Boys.

Anyway, we were sitting outside with Ron and Neville when Nott and Dursley and Crabbe and Goyle came by, and Draco said he was bored and going to have some fun. So he got up and went over to them.

It was hilarious. I picked out Dursley and told him I needed to show him something. Then I held my finger in front of his eyes and moved it back and forth. His eyes followed it around everywhere it went – I was having a really hard time not laughing.

Then he stopped it right in front of Dursley and started moving it toward the idiot's face. Dursley's eyes got so crossed you could barely see them. Ron and I were dying from not laughing. And then Draco went and poked Dursley on the forehead, and we just couldn't keep it in any more.

Well, I think Draco was lucky not to get hurt. Crabbe and Goyle grabbed for him, but he ducked them and got back to us. The boys were all laughing like lunatics – I personally don't see what's so funny about making Dursley look stupid, I mean, it's not like it's hard or anything. Anyway, Nott complained to Snape, and now Draco has detention.

Oh, lighten up, Neenie. The worst he can do is make me scrub the ceiling on my hands and knees or something like that.

Classes are going just fine. Hermione's doing the best out of all of us, but Draco and I aren't doing so badly. Professor McGonagall wants to know how your independent studies are going, and to remind you the first Quidditch match is 17 November, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, at 11:00. Oh, Pearl, Neville says hello. He's been busy – we all have – but he'll write again as soon as he has a minute.

Ron says hello to everyone too. I'm making sure the boys eat their vegetables and change their socks, Danger.

Yes, I've been keeping up with my practice, Letha. And no, it wasn't me or Harry who kept charming the Slytherin table to read "Slytherins are losers" all last week.

I wish we had. It was an excellent prank. I think the twins did it, though. They've been chuckling every time they see a Slytherin.

Neville set a school record yesterday by falling down five flights of stairs without hurting himself more seriously than scratches and bruises. Madam Pomfrey wasn't sure whether to be disgusted or impressed.

Lockhart's still a prat, even if he did save my life. He picks on me every single class to come up and demonstrate bits out of his stupid books. I wish we had Quirrell. Maybe he stutters, but at least he's a decent teacher from what I hear.

Harry, are you out of your mind? At least with Lockhart we don't have any real homework. We just have to think up new ways to flatter him every class and we can get away with not doing anything.

I think Harry's quite right. And this is my letter, so both of you can go suck dragon eggs. That's just about all the news there is from Hogwarts. What's going on at the Den? Anything fun? Please write back soon.

Much love,

Hermione

Harry

Draco

"And just where did my little sister learn a phrase like 'go suck dragon eggs'?" Danger demanded, looking straight at Sirius and Remus.

Both men pointed at each other. Meghan giggled.

Aletha smiled, folding up the cubs' letter, as Danger began to harangue her husband and Pack-brother about proper language in front of the cubs, incidentally using a few of the phrases she was rebuking them for.

Sirius knew it, all those years ago.

Life around here is many things, but it is never, ever dull.

(A/N: Satisfactory, all? I had so much fun envisioning that scene with Draco and Dudley... if you want to change your vote on the Yahoo poll now, there's still time! And please don't forget to review!)

Chapter 7: A Second and A First

Draco closed the door of Snape's office, leaned against the wall, and tried not to groan. It wasn't easy. His back hurt, his knees were sore, and his fingers were throbbing.

All right. It was funny when Ron's mum threatened to make him scrub the ceiling on his hands and knees last summer. It was funny when Ron said Snape might make me do it. And it was funny when I wrote it in the letter.

But when Snape actually made me do it...

Draco had opened the door of Snape's office at eight o'clock and been confronted with some kind of golden mist hanging in the air. "Walk through it, Mr. Black, it won't hurt you," Snape had said from within. Draco had done so – and fallen to the ceiling, his personal gravity apparently reversed. Snape had handed him a charmed bucket of water and a scrub brush and instructed him to clean the ceiling.

And I made a fuss like a bloody Hufflepuff. Draco made a face at the memory of his own timid voice. "But sir, what if I fall?"

"If you fall, you shall acquire a few bruises, and I shall beg forgiveness of your guardians on my knees, Mr. Black. To work."

Which was a Snape-ish way of saying he was sure I wouldn't fall.

And I didn't.

I just hurt all over.

I wonder if Danger and Letha and Mrs. Weasley do things like this every day.

He snorted at his stupidity. No, you idiot, they have magic to do it for them. Snape could do it with magic too, but why bother when it's so much more fun to make students do it for you?

Come on, Draco, time to get your little bum moving. You're going to be late for den.

Draco made a rude gesture at the closed door and turned to head upstairs.

Vincent Crabbe was standing in his way.

"Excuse me," Draco said as politely as he could. "I'd like to get by."

Crabbe didn't move.

"All right, I guess I can go the other way." Draco turned around.

Gregory Goyle was directly behind him, blocking the hallway in that direction.

"I don't suppose you'll let me through."

Goyle stared at him impassively.

"Didn't think so."

"Nott wants to see you," said a voice from behind Draco. He turned. Dudley Dursley was standing beside Crabbe – Draco marveled that there was enough room in the hallway for both of them to fit in it at once. "In our common room. Right away."

"In your common room? I don't even know where it is." Too late, Draco realized that Goyle had just grabbed him from behind. "Hoy, what—"

Dursley grinned nastily. "That's why he sent this." He held up his hand. In it there was a strip of cloth.

Draco considered trying to fight, then decided to let it happen. He was in no shape to fight even one of them, much less all three, and he didn't think they'd try anything in the middle of the school. He contented himself with giving Dursley his nastiest look as the little prat tied the blindfold on him.

He had no idea how far they walked – far enough for Goyle to run him into at least two walls – but it was only about three minutes before he heard Dursley say “Lethifold,” which was followed by a grinding sound. A pause, and then he was propelled forward by a shove from one of the muscle-bound twits, hitting his shoulder painfully on what felt like a stone wall.

“Not like that, you idiots, you weren’t supposed to hurt him!” said Nott’s voice, sounding annoyed. “You can take it off now, Black, you’re where you’re supposed to be.”

That’s only one man’s opinion.

Draco undid the blindfold and looked around. The Slytherin common room was a long, low, underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling and high-backed wooden chairs scattered around. This place would give me claustrophobia. Do they actually like it in here?

Nott was sitting in one of the chairs, his back to the room’s fireplace, which had an elaborately carved wooden mantelpiece and stone side panels. “Have a seat,” he said, waving at one of the chairs. Draco sank into it, trying to keep his wince internal, and realized too late that it had been placed directly under one of the round, greenish lamps hanging from the ceiling on chains, which provided the room with light. Nott could see his face clearly, but he couldn’t see Nott’s very well at all.

Score one for him. Actually, score a lot for him. What does he want?

“I have to apologize for those three,” Nott said, waving at Dursley, Crabbe, and Goyle, who had occupied a green leather couch against the opposite wall from the fireplace. “I asked them to ask you politely to come and talk with me. Obviously, they misunderstood.”

Draco nodded, keeping his face neutral. Misunderstood, my arse. You probably told them to do exactly what they did, and now you’re trying to play the “good guy, bad guy” game. With you in the role of the good guy.

“But, since you’re here,” Nott continued, “we might as well talk.”

“What did you want to talk about?”

“I just wanted to ask you some questions. I think we got off on the wrong foot, you and I, and I wanted to find out why.”

Draco stared at Nott. Is this bloke for real? “Practically the first thing you ever said to me was an insult. You and your goons keep harassing me and my friends and trying to get us in trouble. You even threatened us once. And now you want to know why I don’t like you?”

Nott frowned. “When did I threaten you?”

“I’m not playing this game. This is stupid. I’m leaving.” Draco stood up. Crabbe and Goyle moved to block the exit.

“You’re not leaving,” Nott said casually. “Not until I’m done with you.”

Draco sat back down, thinking quickly.

I need to find another way out of here. And fast.

His Pack-pendant was warm against his chest. Absently, he rubbed his hand against it, making it look like he was scratching. Come on, cunning like a fox. You want to live to get to den-night or not, here, Draco?

In the next instant, a plan presented itself to him.

“Fine, I’m not going anywhere. But can we sit closer to the fire? I’m cold.”

“Fine with me.” Nott got up and moved to a chair next to the fireplace, Dursley coming over to sit behind him. Crabbe and Goyle didn’t move from their posts at the door. Draco opted to sit on the floor in front of the fire.

Always put yourself lower than the other person, if you can, Padfoot’s voice echoed in his mind. It makes him think he has the advantage.

Not to mention, sitting here put him closer to where he'd need to be.

"So when did I threaten you, exactly?" asked Nott again.

"Back in September, the day of our first flying lesson. You came over to our table at dinner and agreed to meet Harry in the trophy room at midnight."

Nott scowled. "He lied. He swore he'd be there, and he lied."

"He didn't swear. You did."

"And you went and told McGonagall on me."

"Like you weren't planning on telling Snape or Filch or someone."

"Notts aren't informants."

"No, they're just toadies to whatever Dark Lord happens to come along."

"Are you calling my father a toady?" Nott said angrily, standing up.

"Yes." Draco stood up too. The conversation was going just the way he needed it to. The fact that he was enjoying baiting Nott shouldn't matter, he told himself firmly. "He was a Death Eater, and that means he kissed Lord Moldy-wart's ugly snaky arse on a regular basis, and he liked it."

Nott was advancing on him, and Draco carefully backed away in just the right direction, towards one side of the fireplace, one particular spot on the wall...

"I ought to take you apart and Vanish you piece by piece," Nott snarled.

"I'd like to see you try." Draco felt carved stone against his back and knew, or rather hoped, he was in position. "Thank you, Salazar

Slytherin,” he said mockingly, “for founding the official house of toad-eaters and Dark idiots.”

Nott, about to retort, instead stared at Draco. Or rather, past him, at the wall behind him.

Yes! Draco could feel a slight draught from behind him, and his fingers could no longer find the wall. He was sure that if he turned around, he would see a large hole in the wall, corresponding exactly with the Gryffindor common room’s entrance to the Hogwarts Den.

“What’s that?” Dursley asked from behind Nott, staring.

“Secret passage,” Draco said nonchalantly. “There’s lots of them around if you know where to find them.” He reached above his head, feeling for the bar he knew should be there, and found it, set in the wall above the hole. “Well, it’s been delightful talking to you, but I really should be going now. Have a nice night.” He hoisted himself into the hole, pulling his feet in after him.

“Get him!” Nott yelled, pointing at the hole.

“Thank you, Salazar,” Draco whispered quickly, and the segment of wall slid out from its hidden slot. Dursley, who had started to rush forward, stepped back in shock, and Draco couldn’t resist wagging his fingers in a snide good-bye wave as the wall closed him off from the Slytherin common room.

Well, that went well.

He lit his wand, got himself turned around, and pushed off. This slide went uphill, which was against all laws of physics but well within the boundaries of magic. Draco braced himself for a sudden drop, but discovered he needn’t have bothered. This passage ended, not with the opening of the floor in midslide, but a gentle stop and the opening of the ceiling, and Draco found himself under the bed in what was certainly the green bedroom of the Hogwarts Den.

“Paid a visit to your friendly neighborhood dungeons, did you?” asked Al from his frame, which the boys had hung on the wall of the green

bedroom at their previous den-night, as Draco crawled out from under the bed. “You’d better restrict that door so they can’t open it. They’re Slytherins, they’ll figure out the password eventually.”

“How do I do that?”

“Go back under there and tell the passage who to respond to. Like so. ‘Salazar says, respond only to Harry Potter, Draco Black, Hermione Granger-Lupin...’ You get the idea.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “‘Salazar says’?”

“I didn’t come up with it, I just know it.”

“You seem to know my family pretty well for a portrait.”

“Like I said, word gets around.”

Draco crawled back under the bed and locked the passage against anyone but himself, Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville. After a moment’s thought, he added Ginny, Luna, and Meghan to the list.

Though what they’d be doing in the Slytherin common room I have no idea.

“And you probably need to get back to the Gryffindor common room now,” Al said as Draco re-emerged.

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

“Word to the wise. Say ‘stealth mode’ before you say the password to any of the doors, and no one will notice them, or you. They’ll just think they didn’t see you leave or come in the usual way.”

“Hey, that’s great – so we don’t have to wait for the common room to clear out every time we go to den! Thanks, Al!”

“Anytime, little fox.”

Draco shook his head. “Uh-uh. Only the Pack calls me that.”

“Please?” Al looked soulful.

“All right, puppy-dog eyes on a man your age are just wrong. Stop. Please.” Draco averted his own eyes.

“All right, I’ll stop. But can I give you one more piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t have to cram yourselves into one bedroom every time you come down here. Just tell the main room what you want, and it’ll change to accommodate.”

“Cool.”

“If there’s going to be eight of you next year, you’re going to need more space than just one bedroom,” Al finished.

“True enough – but there’s only going to be seven of us next year. Meghan’s not coming till we’re fourth years.”

Al shrugged. “Whatever you say. It’s getting late, you’d better get upstairs. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

“Thanks.”

Draco went into the main room. “Padded floor, no table and chairs?” he said tentatively, and pressed himself against the wall in slight alarm as the floor rippled under his feet, developing a soft surface, and the table and chairs simply vanished.

Well, that works.

He walked across the newly open space and into the red bedroom. Three jumps, “stealth mode, thank you, Godric,” and one uphill slide later, he was climbing out of a hole in the Gryffindor common room

wall, in full sight of more than half the house including his Pack, and no one even looked his way.

I think I like this.

“There you are,” said Harry in relief as Draco joined the group. “We were about to go looking for you – the pendants heated up, and your carving was glowing, but then they cooled back off, and we figured that meant you were all right.”

“You wouldn’t have found me anyway. Nott had his goons drag me off to the Slytherin common room. And I do mean drag.”

“What did he want?” asked Ron.

“He said he just wanted to talk, but that’s kind of hard to believe when he had Dursley, Crabbe, and Goyle ambush me outside Snape’s office, blindfold me, and shove me around the dungeons for a while. On the upside, if we can find the entrance to the Slytherin common room, I know their password now.”

“How’d you get out?” Neville asked almost fearfully.

Draco grinned. “I found another door to the Hogwarts Den.”

“In the Slytherin common room?” Ron asked incredulously.

“Slytherins aren’t all bad,” said Hermione repressively. “Possibly.”

Draco went on, ignoring this. “I figured if the one in ours led to the red bedroom, then there might be one in theirs leading to the green bedroom, and I was right – only differences are, it lets out under the bed instead of above it, and the password’s ‘Thank you, Salazar’.”

“What does it look like?” Neville wanted to know. “The Slytherin common room?”

“Dungeon-esque. Not very comfortable. I like it better up here.”

“So now we have a secret way into the Slytherin common room,” said Ron, grinning. “Wicked.”

“We’re not using the Den to play pranks,” said Harry sternly. “That’s not what it’s for.” Then he returned Ron’s grin. “Besides, we don’t need to. We have the Map to show us where the door is, and now we’ve got their password.”

“And that’s not all,” said Draco. “Watch this.”

He demonstrated “stealth mode”.

“So we can go to den anytime,” said Hermione happily. “Is everyone done with their homework?”

“Nothing says we can’t take it down there with us if we’re not,” said Harry, closing his Charms book. “Everyone all right with going down sooner rather than later?”

“Won’t people notice that we’re not in bed?” asked Ron.

“Not if we pull our curtains, they shouldn’t. They’ll just think they missed us going upstairs, and we’ll be awake in time in the morning to get back to the dorms before they find out we’re not there.”

“I’ll go,” said Neville, putting the stopper into his ink bottle. “I just need to get changed.”

“We all do,” said Harry. “Meet back here in ten minutes?”

It was agreed, and the cubs’ Pack headed for their dormitories. Draco grinned to himself as he followed Ron up the stairs.

And I didn’t even tell them about the main room’s new look.

As 17 November approached, Harry began to feel anxious. He loved flying, he knew he was good, but this would be his first time flying in front of so many people – what if he messed up or fell off his broom? What if Slytherin got the Snitch and he lost his first match ever?

“Don’t be stupid, Harry, you’ll be fine,” Ron told him in the common room the night of the 16th. “You’re better than Charlie ever was, everyone says so. You’re the best they’ve had at Hogwarts for years.”

“Terence Higgs Seeks for Slytherin,” said Fred, dropping into an armchair nearby. “He’s not bad, but you can beat him, Harry. Just fly like you do at our place.”

“There aren’t hundreds of people looking at me at your place,” Harry reminded them.

“You’re not shy, are you?” asked George in shock.

“No!”

“It’s just stage fright,” said Draco. “You’ll do fine once you get out there, Harry, you’ve been waiting for this your whole life.”

“I know.”

But this is one time I wish my whole life was a little longer. Harry woke up at 6:30 the next morning and was unable to get back to sleep. Finally, at eight o’clock, he admitted defeat and got up. Everyone else was still asleep, and he had no intention of waking anyone up. He got dressed quietly, left the dormitory, got halfway down the stairs, and froze.

Two of the common room sofas were occupied.

Harry grinned as he recognized the occupants.

He went down the rest of the stairs very quietly, came around to the front of the couch with more people on it, and covered one mouth while gently shaking its owner’s shoulder.

Grey eyes snapped open.

Harry touched a finger to his lips. The dark head nodded.

“Want to see our Den?” he asked in a whisper. Another nod.

He led the way to the fireplace, opened the entrance in stealth mode, and helped his sister in, waiting a suitable amount of time before climbing in himself and closing the wall behind him.

“This is so cool!” squealed Meghan before Harry’d even had a chance to get off the bed. She was bouncing around the red bedroom, looking at everything. “I love it!”

“Wait until you see the rest of it,” said Harry with a smile, intercepting a hug and feeling his spirits lift. Meghan’s excitement, as always, was contagious.

They explored the Den together, and Harry introduced Meghan to Al and vice versa. “Quite a lovely young lady,” Al said, bowing to her. “Hogwarts welcomes you with open arms, m’dear.” Meghan giggled and curtsied in return.

Once they had seen all the rooms, they returned to the Gryffindor common room, again utilizing stealth mode. They didn’t need to, as it happened – the Pack-parents were all still asleep – but it never hurt to be careful.

“Now we can have some fun,” Harry whispered to Meghan, and detailed what he wanted her to do. Meghan nodded happily and tiptoed around behind her sleeping parents. Harry positioned himself behind the other sofa.

This is so easy it’s almost wrong.

He held up fingers – one, two, three.

“BOO!” they both said aloud.

The results were almost exactly what Harry had hoped for. Moony’s entire body jerked, Danger shot upright, Letha gave a little scream, and Padfoot almost fell off the couch, saving himself at the last minute by grabbing hold of the arm.

“Aww,” said Meghan in disappointment.

Harry doubled over laughing.

"You horrible little brat," said Danger, glaring at him. "And here I was going to say how happy I was to see you."

"I knew we shouldn't have kept you," said Padfoot in a mock-angry tone. "You're a bad influence on my sweet little Pearl. She'd never do anything like that to her poor old Dadfoot on her own."

Harry got himself under enough control to stand up. "It was her idea," he claimed.

"Really?" asked Moony, giving Harry the "don't-mess-with-me-now" look.

Harry grinned and shook his head.

"But I'm sure it could have been," Moony arched his back, stretching. "Meghan's no slouch when it comes to pranks. You wait and see, Padfoot. One of these days, she's going to surprise everyone."

"She already did," said Letha ruefully. "My heart is still racing."

"Good practice for the match, then," said Padfoot. "It should be quite a game. The Weasley twins for Beaters, and I understand you've got an all-female Chaser lineup. Are they any good?"

Harry nodded. "Draco'll have to work hard if he wants to be on the team next year. Ron, too. Wood's an excellent Keeper."

"I'm sure they'll qualify for reserves," said Danger. "They've got a whole year to practice. Speaking of them, where are they?"

"Almost everyone has a lie-in on weekends," explained Harry.

"You can't have forgot about that from being a kid, Danger," said Letha. "Stay up late and sleep late whenever you possibly can. It's fun."

“What do you mean, forgot about it, I still do it. But I thought they’d be up early, being excited. I’m excited. My first-ever Quidditch match.”

“That’s true, you’ve never seen a professional game,” said Moony. “We’ll have to find some time to get everyone to a match this summer.”

“Ballycastle Bats forever,” proclaimed Padfoot solemnly.

“Not on your life. Wimbourne Wasps or nothing.”

Just in time to avert the latest outbreak of what Harry knew was a long-standing quarrel, Hermione came flying down the girls’ stairs, shoes untied, shirt half-buttoned, hair standing out wildly around her head. “You’re here, you’re here!”

“We’re here, we’re here,” teased Moony, catching her as she leapt at him from the third stair and twirling her around. “How are you, Kitten?”

“I’m fine – I got an eleven out of ten on my Transfiguration homework, and Professor Snape said my potion was marginally acceptable!”

“High praise, considering the source. Well done.” Moony put Hermione down on her feet, and she ran to hug Danger, then Padfoot and Letha.

“Nervous?” Moony asked Harry softly, coming over to him.

“A little,” Harry admitted.

“That’s normal. But you will do well, Greeneyes. I know it. I think I’ve told you this, but do you know what you said the first time I ever took you flying?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t remember.” In truth, he did, but he wanted to hear it again.

“You said, ‘Fasser, Moony!’” His Pack-father imitated Harry’s baby tones, and they both laughed.

“Win or lose, just your being out there makes us proud,” Moony went on. Then he lowered his voice conspiratorially. “But don’t go and lose your first match to Slytherin. Sirius would never let you live it down.”

Harry nodded. “All right. I won’t.”

And for perhaps the first time, he felt as if he wouldn’t. Minerva McGonagall pulled Remus aside just as the Pack was setting out for the Quidditch pitch. Go on without me, he told Danger. This sounds important, and I know how to get there.

“Andy!” Sirius exclaimed in delight as he saw who was sitting in the stands.

Andromeda Tonks got up with a smile to hug her cousin. “Dora couldn’t get off training, but she sends her regards,” she said. “Hello, everyone, how have you been?”

“Quite good, actually,” said Aletha, hugging Andy in her turn. “Life’s been about as normal as it ever is at our house. It’s much quieter with three of the cubs here instead of there.”

“I would imagine.” Andromeda sat down again next to Danger. “I was hoping to talk to Remus,” she said quietly. “Is he here?”

Danger closed her eyes, as if in thought – in reality, she was tuning in to what Remus saw – the stands around the pitch, drawing steadily nearer. “He’s on his way over, Minerva wanted a word with him before the match.”

“Excellent. I understand your Harry’s playing today.”

“Yes, we’re all so excited.”

“Where’s Meghan?” Andy looked around. “I thought she’d be wild to see the game.”

“Oh, she is – she’s sitting with Hermione and Draco and their friends Ron and Neville, down in the student section. Look, there they are – Ron’s a Weasley, so you can see him a mile away...”

Remus arrived in the stands and shook hands with Andromeda. We need to talk later, he told Danger. Nothing terribly urgent, but Pack business.

“I’m glad to see you in good health, Remus,” said Andy, flicking her eyes upward for a brief second. The Lupins didn’t need to touch mentally to know she was referring to the recently passed full moon.

“I have my beautiful Danger to thank, as always,” said Remus lightly.

Andromeda leaned closer. “I was hoping to speak with you about that very subject. Ask some questions. Off the record, of course, for my own personal interest. But I thought it might be of some use to you to have a Healer’s opinion – if I’m out of line, feel free to tell me to bugger off, but this is something of a once-in-a-lifetime chance, I felt I simply had to take it...”

“Not at all,” said Danger, when Remus gave her the mental go-ahead. “Would you like to come over for tea, say tomorrow afternoon? Four o’clock?”

Andy sighed. “I’m working tomorrow. Can we make it Sunday week?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, you have no idea what this means to me – oh, look, here they come...”

The Gryffindor team was indeed walking out onto the field. Sirius gave a two-fingered whistle as Harry emerged from the locker room, and he wasn’t the only one. Most of the school seemed to be rooting for the Gryffindors.

“Some things never change,” said Aletha with a reminiscent smile.

The team captains shook hands, Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the game began.

Gryffindor scored within the first few minutes, prompting massive cheers from the stands. Harry, circling high above, came down long enough to slap the hand of the scorer, a tall black girl, before returning to his station high above.

“Not seeing too much action, is he?” asked Remus, peering up at the boy.

“It’s strategy, Moony,” Sirius said almost absently, watching George Weasley going after a Bludger. “The higher he is, the more he can see, and the less likely a Bludger will go after him, they tend to stay in the thick of things – ah, I lied, sorry.”

The other Bludger, the one George wasn’t currently belting at a Slytherin Chaser, had just rocketed upwards, straight at Harry, who dodged it easily. Fred followed it up and beat it back down towards the game.

“What are those things made of, anyway?” Danger asked, watching the black ball slam hard into the Slytherin Keeper, Miles Bletchley, allowing one of the other Gryffindor Chasers to score.

Sirius pumped his fist in the air before answering. “Bludgers? I think in the professional leagues they’re iron, but at Hogwarts they’re wood. Keeps things from getting too out of hand.”

“Usually,” Remus corrected blandly. “If a Beater hits them hard enough, funny things can happen.”

“If you’re referring to our seventh year, they never proved anything.”

“Oh, cut the crap, Sirius, I watched you hex your bat,” Aletha said impatiently.

Andy chuckled. “Oh, what did he do?”

“Charmed it to turn whatever it hit into iron temporarily,” answered Aletha promptly. “Somehow the effect lasted just long enough for the Bludger to hit the opposing player, then wore off.”

“James was none too pleased when he accidentally flew into the path of one you hit,” recalled Remus. “It almost knocked him off his broom.”

Danger laughed, then booed as a Slytherin Chaser slipped past Wood and scored. Something caught her eye, and she turned her head to follow it. “Look, it’s Harry, there he goes!”

Everyone’s heads jerked up. Harry was indeed speeding earthwards in a sharp dive. “Does he see the Snitch, d’you think?” asked Sirius, leaning forward in his excitement.

“No, he’s got a Bludger on his tail,” Aletha said, her voice sharp with worry. “Look, it’s trying to pick him off.”

The black ball was indeed following Harry as closely as it could, trying to keep up with him as he swerved and dodged.

Sirius frowned. “Something’s not right here. Bludgers don’t behave like that.”

“Well, this Bludger obviously is,” said Aletha tartly. “So someone must have tampered with it.”

“Wood’s the captain,” said Remus, looking down the pitch to the Gryffindor goals. “Why hasn’t he called for time-out?”

“He may not have seen it yet,” Danger said. “It’s only just started.”

“It’s his job to see it,” said Sirius angrily. “He’s supposed to be watching his team, making sure they’re all right...” He stopped, eyes widening.

Danger gasped as she felt what Sirius obviously already had.

“What’s wrong?” Andy asked, seeing the expressions on four faces change from annoyed or angry to fearful.

“It has to be him,” said Aletha, staring around at the Pack. “There’s no one else in any kind of bad situation...”

Sirius yanked his pendants from his robes, looked at them, and swore under his breath. “It is him.”

“What’s him?” Andromeda looked highly confused.

“The pendants tell us if someone is in trouble,” explained Remus, staring out at the pitch, where Harry was still trying to shake off the Bludger. “And they’ve just activated for Harry.”

“We have to do something,” murmured Danger. “But what?”

“We can’t try anything wanded,” said Aletha, following Harry’s progress with her eyes. “Too much chance of hitting one of the other players. But we can’t just sit here...” The frustration in her voice was almost tangible.

Remus straightened suddenly. “Everyone, quiet.” His voice carried authority. “I know what to do.”

Sirius was about to ask what, but Danger gave him the Granger-Lupin glare, and he closed his mouth.

Harry was above the crowd now, and the Bludger seemed to have vanished, but the pendants were still cold. It’s too calm, Danger thought worriedly. It’s too calm, I don’t like it –

She cried out involuntarily. The Bludger had come seemingly out of nowhere and slammed into Harry’s right side – he was reeling on his broom, his arm clamped to his side, held at an unnatural angle and obviously broken – Aletha’s lips were almost white, she was biting them so hard – the Bludger was turning around for another attack –

When it burst into flame and fell from the sky, ashes before it hit the ground.

The chain around Danger's neck returned to its normal temperature in an instant, as if it had never been anything else.

Why didn't I think of that? she asked conversationally.

I don't know. But I'm glad one of us did.

Harry had sent his broom into a gentle dive, his face completely chalk-white. Madam Hooch's whistle blew for time-out. The Pack rose as one and hurried to the stairs, united in their resolve to be there when he reached the ground. A commotion in the student section caught Danger's eye – she had no doubt the other cubs were on their way to the stairs as well.

Sirius reached Harry's side just as the boy's feet touched the ground. Harry's lips were a thin line, his face drawn – he was obviously in a lot of pain. Danger watched Sirius gently help Harry sit down on the ground, carefully avoiding touching the hurt arm.

"Can he play?" Oliver Wood panted, dropping from his broomstick beside Sirius and Harry as the rest of the Pack caught up with them. "Harry, are you all right to go on?"

Harry shook his head. "No need," he said with a small smile, and held up his left hand.

The Golden Snitch was beating its wings against his fingers.

Wood let out a whoop of joy. "Potter's got the Snitch!" he shouted towards Madam Hooch. "Gryffindor wins!"

The stands erupted with joyful shouts.

"Come on, Greeneyes, let's get you to the hospital wing," Sirius said, drawing his wand to conjure a stretcher.

"Don't, please," Harry protested as the other cubs, Ron, and Neville came running up. "My arm got hurt, not my leg."

“And jarring a broken bone is very bad for it,” said Aletha sternly. “On you get.”

Harry sighed, but allowed Sirius to guide the stretcher underneath him, although he positively refused to lie down on it, sitting cross-legged instead.

“Does it hurt a lot, Harry?” asked Meghan, slipping her hand into Harry’s unhurt one.

The bigger boy smiled at his sister. “Not as much as it did, Pearl. I think you have magic hands.”

“You can ride with Harry if you like,” suggested Sirius. Meghan needed no second invitation, climbing eagerly but carefully onto the stretcher and allowing herself to be borne in state towards the castle.

“He’ll be all right,” said Remus, laying an arm gently on Danger’s shoulders as they watched the little parade move toward the castle. “Madam Pomfrey’s excellent with broken bones.”

“Remus, Danger, a word, if I might?” said Dumbledore’s voice from beside them.

“Of course, Headmaster,” said Remus as Danger nodded.

“I was hoping you might be able to shed some light on the spontaneous combustion of the Bludger.”

Remus looked carefully around the pitch, then held out his hand. A tiny flame danced in his palm. Danger touched her finger to it, lighting it as she might a candle, and held it up for Dumbledore’s observation.

“I... see,” the Headmaster said slowly. “And from whence comes this rather interesting power?”

A chuckle passed between the Lupins mentally. “How much time do you have?” Remus asked aloud.

“A short version will suffice for the moment, but I would greatly like to hear the full version – provided you are willing to tell it – perhaps later this afternoon, if you and the rest of the Pack will accept an invitation to tea.”

“Short version, then, it was a gift,” said Danger. “It comes from the same general source these do.” She hooked a finger around her Pack-pendant chain and brought them out. “I think we’ve told you about them.”

“Yes. But not about this.”

“An oversight on our part,” said Remus smoothly, closing his palm and snuffing the flame out as Danger blew out the one on her finger. “We apologize.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Is three-thirty an acceptable time for tea, in my office?”

“Of course.”

The Headmaster gave them a slight bow, then turned to go back to the castle.

An oversight? Danger asked.

Poetic license. It doesn’t sound particularly good to say “Yes, we decided not to tell you that we’d been gifted with power over fire by the daughter of Godric Gryffindor.”

True enough. Danger frowned, thinking. Does he know about this?

Our connection? No, I don’t think he does.

All in favor of leaving it that way?

Aye, Remus said promptly.

Aye, Danger agreed. Some things should be private.

So true. Remus then proceeded to make a detailed suggestion about something he wanted to stay private, which made Danger blush furiously and giggle like a schoolgirl as they made their way up to the castle.

Gryffindor had won, one hundred seventy to ten.

As Sirius said when Harry joined them at lunch, "Not too bad for your first game."

(A/N: So yeah, I have tons of work to do, and I really shouldn't be writing at all, but I couldn't resist writing this chapter. Lots of info, and some interesting stuff (or at least stuff I think is interesting), and plenty of set-up for things to come – so please enjoy, please review, and please keep up the great discussions on the Yahoo group! Oh yes, and who can figure out what the chapter title means? Answer on Yahoo in a couple days!)

Chapter 8: Anomaly

So what did Minerva want? Danger asked Remus as they sat in the Gryffindor common room, half-listening to Sirius tell Harry how good a flyer he was.

That's not very good for Harry, he really doesn't need his head swelled, muttered Remus absently, looking intently at Sirius.

Are you listening to me?

What?

Never mind, that answers my question. And if you're trying to give Sirius the Look of Doom, it's not going to work.

Why not?

It's limited to females.

Now that's sexist.

Sexist but true. Watch. Danger fixed her eyes on Sirius.

"... but the way you dodged that thing for so long, it was incredible, Harry..." Sirius trailed off. "What?" he asked Danger uneasily.

"I concede," said Remus, giving Danger a courteous half-bow.

Danger smiled sweetly. "You always do."

The cubs looked resigned. Ron and Neville looked at each other in confusion. Sirius rolled his eyes, and Aletha sighed. "You two," she said in a highly tolerant tone of voice. "How are classes coming, everyone?"

Hermione, who had been collapsed in her chair with an expression of deadly boredom, perked up immediately at this. The boys slumped almost as one.

So what were you saying? asked Remus as Hermione began a high-speed monologue on how much she was learning.

I was asking what Minerva McGonagall had to tell you before the Quidditch match.

Ah, yes. It seems that Lucius Malfoy isn't the only person Wormtail told about my... condition. A wizard by the name of Patroclus Nott also knows about it. And he told his offspring.

That being one Theodore Nott?

Yes. And young Nott used this information, or tried to use it, to blackmail Harry and the others out of the dorm at midnight.

What happened?

Somehow or other, they turned it around on him – got him to show up and didn't go themselves – while telling Minerva about it. She took twenty points from Slytherin, as I understand it.

All right...

She also wished us to know that she has, as she put it, "removed the threat".

She... Danger trailed off as she saw the meaning in Remus' mind. Oh.

Yes.

We owe her even more now, don't we.

Yes. That wasn't just bending the rules – that was breaking the law. Only Aurors or qualified Obliviators are supposed to use Memory Charms, and only under certain circumstances. And almost never on a minor.

Is there any chance of her getting caught for this?

Not much. Not unless the elder Nott figures out what happened, which seems unlikely. After all, Theodore could have just forgot it on his own.

I hope you're right.

You know I'm right. I'm always right.

Now whose head is swelled? Braggart.

Nitpicker.

Stuck-up.

Nosey.

Man.

Woman.

And don't you forget it.

Harry pulled Padfoot and Moony aside before they left.

"Why doesn't the Map show what's behind the locked door on the third floor?" he asked without preamble.

"Because we told it not to," answered Moony just as directly.

"Why?"

"Because the door's locked for a reason, and we didn't want you lot going exploring," said Padfoot. "You have better things to do, like Quidditch practice."

"Do you know what's behind the door?" asked Moony.

"Big three-headed dog."

Padfoot sighed. "Do I even want to know?"

"If you don't, I do. How did you find out, Harry?"

"Draco and Hermione found out on Halloween. They got lost up there and heard Professor Quirrell nearly getting his leg bitten off – Snape had to save him."

"Quirrell nearly getting his leg bitten off?" Padfoot exchanged a puzzled look with Moony. "What was Quirrell doing there in the first place?"

"Don't know. After Snape took Quirrell down to the hospital wing, Draco had a look through the keyhole and saw the dog."

"So, technically, he didn't break any rules," said Moony, rolling his eyes. "Remind me again why we raised them Marauders, Padfoot?"

"Because we didn't know any other way to raise them?"

"That might be it. Harry, please don't go messing around with that door. What's behind it is none of your concern, none of any of our concern really. It's..." The Pack-fathers exchanged another look, one Harry knew. It was the "how much are we going to tell him" look.

"Sirius, go bother the girls," said Moony finally.

"Yes, sir," said Padfoot promptly, saluting. He winked at Harry as he left.

"This is more than a den-secret, Harry," said Moony quietly, bending close to him. "This is an alpha male secret. You're to tell no one. Absolutely no one. Is that clear?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"There is a very precious object behind that door. It was in danger of being stolen where it was, therefore it was moved to Hogwarts. A series of enchantments and magical safeguards have been placed on it. I helped with the safeguarding – the whole Pack did – and I can tell you with some surety that I doubt anyone living today could break

through all of them. The object behind that door is as safe as magic can make it. It is not your problem, and you are not to make it so. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is not common knowledge, Harry. If it becomes so, I will know where it came from, and you will think you got off lightly the day you filled the sugar bowl with salt. So keep your mouth closed. Not even your alpha female can know this."

Harry frowned. "I don't have an alpha female."

"Yes, you do. Hermione's your alpha female."

"What? I'm not being mates with Hermione! That's just gross!"

"Oh – no, no, you misunderstood," said Moony, laughing slightly. "I didn't mean it that way. The rules are different for a cubs' pack. Hermione's your alpha female because she's your sister. When you get old enough for mate-choosing, then your pack will reorganize, and then your alpha female will be your mate."

Harry wiped his forehead exaggeratedly. "Phew. That was weird."

"Do you have any prospects in mind?" inquired Moony blandly.

"For what?"

"Choosing a mate."

Harry looked at his Pack-father oddly. "No."

Moony shrugged. "I just thought I'd ask."

Harry scowled, recognizing the little smile Moony was wearing. It was the "I know something you don't and I'm not going to tell you what it is" smile.

I hate it when he does that.

"When do you lot have Defense?" asked Fred at lunch on Tuesday, dropping into a seat beside Harry.

"Thursday mornings. Why?"

"We had Quirrell this morning," said George, sitting down on the other side of the table. "He said Lockhart's s-s-sick." He imitated Quirrell's stutter tellingly.

"Did he say what was wrong with him?" asked Hermione worriedly.

"Hope it's something bad," said Ron. "Then maybe he'll still be out on Thursday."

"Ron, that's awful!"

"You said yourself you wanted a lesson with Quirrell," Draco reminded her. "In the letter we wrote home, remember?"

"I did not."

"You did so."

"I was just agreeing with Harry to be polite," said Hermione frostily. "I never actually meant it."

The noise at the Gryffindor table turned quite a few heads through the Great Hall, but most of them turned back to their food when they saw it was just a bunch of people laughing.

Sadly, Lockhart was fully recovered by Thursday. He arrived at breakfast beaming, and publicly thanked the forty-seven people who'd sent him get-well cards, mentioning Hermione by name, causing her to spill her corn flakes down her front so that she had to go back to the dormitory and change her robes.

Lockhart had cut back on reenacting bits from his books after the incident with Neville and the wig, for which everyone was grateful, Harry most of all – it meant he'd only be humiliated once every few classes, instead of every single time. But it seemed nothing could

stop Lockhart from reading his own work aloud, in a highly declamatory tone, and the bulk of every class consisted of this.

Luckily, the stack created by Harry's and Ron's books combined was tall enough that they could nap on their desk during class and Lockhart never noticed. Harry stayed awake just long enough to register that today's book was *Holidays with Hags* before drifting off.

He was awakened only a moment later by Hermione poking him with her quill.

"You're being rude," she hissed, looking highly annoyed.

"Hermione, Lockhart doesn't care," said Ron sleepily from beyond Harry. "Why should you?"

"I think she fancies him," said Draco from the table behind them.

"I do not fancy him," said Hermione with dignity.

"Then lay off and let us sleep," said Harry, adjusting himself on the desk.

Hermione scowled. "I'm not letting you copy my notes," she warned.

"Why would we need to?" asked Ron with a huge yawn. "He never gives tests anyway." His eyes closed, and Harry's did the same a moment later.

"We'll be spending the rest of the term on *Holidays with Hags*," Lockhart announced when the bell rang. "Then, next term, we'll start on *Wanderings with Werewolves*."

"We knew more about werewolves when we were five than he does now," Draco muttered to Harry as they left class.

"We had a bit of an advantage, you know," Harry pointed out.

"True."

Andromeda arrived at the Den at four o'clock on Sunday, carrying a large black bag which fascinated Meghan. The girl kept trying to get a look inside it, until Andromeda finally removed a few breakable items and handed it over to her. "You can be my assistant later," she said. "For right now, why don't you take that in the other room and look through it. See if you can identify any of the potions by looks alone. No tasting or smelling, some of them can be poisonous."

"Okay." Meghan hurried away, carrying the precious bag clutched to her chest.

Andy watched her go. "How much does she know about potions?" she asked.

"Probably as much as a lot of the first years at Hogwarts do," answered Aletha. "She's hanging over my shoulder every time I'm at the cauldron – her and Draco, when he's here, they won't leave me alone. I think she may have memorized the Child's Guide to Potions by now."

"No, that's Hermione's trick," said Sirius. "Meghan just knows exactly where to look for everything in it."

"And she's going to get some help," said Aletha, rising, "as I have a feeling we're not wanted here at the moment."

Andy shook her head. "Nonsense, you're welcome to stay if you like."

"No, I think interviews go better if only the people who need to be there are there. We'll be in the music room if you need us." Aletha towed an unresisting Sirius out of the room, making everyone chuckle.

"Life must be a great deal of fun, living with those two," said Andromeda.

"They tend to say the same about us," said Remus. "We're ready when you are, Madam Healer."

"All right. We'll start general – what can you tell me about the taming effect? How does it seem to work?"

The interview lasted nearly an hour, with occasional laughter breaks when someone cracked a joke too good to pass up. When Andy had satisfied her curiosity verbally, she called Meghan in and had the girl give her a variety of potions, some of which she asked Remus and Danger to drink, some of which she applied to their skin, and one of which she got them to spit into, making Meghan giggle.

“And, if it’s not asking too much, I’d like to take some samples,” Andy said, putting the last of the potions back in her bag. “Blood, hair, that sort of thing.”

The Lupins exchanged a glance; Remus nodded. “Fine with us,” said Danger.

They adjourned to the main floor bathroom.

“I’m quite impressed with Meghan,” commented Andy when everything was finished and she and the Pack-adults were sitting around with their tea. The object of the discussion had gone over to the Burrow to play. “Do you know, she gave me the correct potion I asked for every time?”

“Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts is disappointed that Meghan won’t be coming for three more years,” said Sirius. “I think her exact words were, ‘Finally, a child who’s more interested in what happens here than in how soon she can leave!’”

“You have to remember, though, Pearl’s never been a patient there yet,” said Remus. “She’s not much fun when she’s the sick one.”

“She’s too energetic usually to enjoy being stuck in bed,” said Aletha with a sigh. “She’s like Harry that way. Hermione and Draco are easier to handle if they get a cold or something.”

“And, of course, it’s Harry who’s already been to the hospital wing twice in his first term of school,” Danger finished.

“All that energy has to go somewhere,” said Sirius.

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to go into making trouble. He didn’t have to go looking for that troll.”

“So he should just have let your little sister get pulverized?”

“The teachers were looking for it – they would have found it before it hurt her!”

“Are you willing to bet her life on that?”

Danger sat up straighter in indignation. Remus reached over and put a hand on her arm. Aletha reached around and tapped Sirius on the shoulder, pulling his attention to her. Both combatants glared at their spouses for a moment. The spouses glared back. After a moment, Sirius and Danger both slumped slightly, Sirius with a small groan and Danger with a sigh, and nodded to each other before relaxing.

“Fascinating,” murmured Andy. “An unspoken language, indigenous to this family group.”

“Now you sound like a scholar,” said Sirius.

“I’m a research Healer. It’s much the same thing. And I should be going, Ted will be expecting me home for dinner.” Andromeda got up and said her goodbyes. “I’ll have results from the tests on those samples in a few days,” she told Remus and Danger on her way to the Floo. “I’ll owl you with them.”

“All right, thanks.” Danger, and the rest of the Pack, waved as Andy’s figure disappeared in the green flames.

“So, now to the important question,” said Sirius. “What’s for our dinner?”

Danger folded her arms. “I think I’ve put up with quite enough from you for today.” She pointed dramatically at Sirius, who shrank back slightly, then began checking himself over, patting at his body as if expecting to find portions of it on fire. Danger turned on her heel and walked out of the room.

“What did you do to him?” asked Aletha, falling into step with her friend.

“Nothing. But try getting him to believe that.”

Aletha smiled, shaking her head. “You are wicked.”

“You hadn’t figured that out yet?”

That night, nothing – or so it appeared – moved through the halls of Hogwarts.

I still don’t see why we didn’t do this last night, said Ron, fiddling with the loop of fine gold chain around his neck as he moved carefully in lockstep with the other boys down the hall.

Because they would have expected that, said Draco. They always expect you to do a prank on weekends.

This is the weekend.

One when you don’t have classes the next day.

Oh.

Shut up, said Harry absently, and stop.

The trio halted.

Map, please.

Draco handed it over. Harry activated it and lit his wand so they could see what was happening.

According to this, the Slytherin common room is two corridors that way, and there’s no teachers around. Mrs. Norris is the closest... thing that could get us in trouble, and she’s three floors away. Harry smiled predatorily at his brother and best friend. Gentlemen, I believe the Slytherins have a date with a bag of Paint Bombs.

Hermione was furious.

"I can't believe you pulled a prank without me!"

"You were all busy with studying," protested Harry. "We kept asking you if you wanted to do something fun, and you kept telling us to go away."

"I didn't know you meant that kind of fun!"

"What other kind of fun is there?" asked Draco.

"What's wrong with Goyle?" said Neville, staring across the hall at the hulking Slytherin boy, whose face was abraded and red where it wasn't green.

"Scourgify gone wrong," said Ron with certainty. "Fred and George look just like that when they've tried to clear up one of their messes on their own." He looked at another part of the Slytherin table. "Bet you anything Nott went to the hospital wing. He looks perfectly normal."

"Either that or he didn't get hit with it," said Hermione. "They couldn't all be in there – when's all of Gryffindor house ever in the common room at the same time?"

"Parties?"

"All right, other than parties."

"After curfew but before bed?"

"Other than that too."

"When we get sent there?"

"Ron, will you just stop!"

Ron shrugged. "First she asks a question, then she yells at me for answering it," he said resignedly.

“Girls in general are hard to understand,” said Harry. “Hermione more than most.”

“Why?” asked Ron, facing away from the person under discussion and not noticing the look on her face.

Harry, however, noticed it quickly, and revamped his answer to mollify her. “Because, er, because she’s smart, and her brain’s more complicated than the rest of us.”

Hermione subsided, looking satisfied.

Nice one, Draco mouthed at his brother.

On Wednesday morning, the phone at the Den rang. “I got it,” called Aletha from the kitchen. “Hello? Oh, Andy, hi!”

A pause.

“Oh, good. Wait, is something wrong?”

Another pause.

“I don’t know, you just sound odd... yes, we’re free now. Yes, come right over. We’ll be expecting you.” She hung up. “Andy says she’s finished with the tests,” she said to Remus, who was standing in the kitchen doorway. “And she’s on her way over. She said something about an anomaly.”

Remus grimaced slightly. “That’s the kind of word Healers use to mean ‘there’s something wrong with you and we don’t know what’.”

“No, she didn’t sound unhappy about it. Just... confused.”

The Floo chimed. “And there she is now, I’m sure.” Aletha hurried into the other room, where Danger had set aside her book to greet Andromeda. Sirius came downstairs from his writing room to say hello as well.

“Now, this one I think you should all be in on,” said Andy when the greetings were finished. “If only because you live in such close proximity. May I ask an intrusive question?”

“That depends on what it is,” answered Remus as the group found seats.

“How long do you plan to keep living like this?”

“All in the same house, you mean?”

Andromeda nodded.

The Pack glanced at one another. “We haven’t thought much about it, to tell you the truth,” said Remus slowly. “We’re more or less used to each other by now, so we seem to have assumed that we’ll be maintaining the status quo for the foreseeable future. Is there some kind of health consideration we should know about?”

“No. Actually, it’s the opposite. There appears to be something you won’t have to worry about.”

“Anything that creates less worry is fine with me,” said Aletha frankly, as the rest of the Pack nodded.

“Do you want a drumroll?” asked Danger mischievously.

“No, thank you,” said Andy, chuckling. “Remus – according to the tests I ran, you’re not a werewolf.”

“For that, there should have been a drumroll,” said Sirius after a moment of silence. “Personally, Andy, I’d say your tests have gone off the deep end – I know this bloke gets hairy on full moons.”

“And how can I do that, since Harry’s at Hogwarts?” asked Remus mildly.

The women snickered. Sirius groaned. “That’s so terrible.”

Remus raised an eyebrow. "This from the man who makes a pun on his own first name exactly once a year."

"Why once a year?" asked Andy curiously.

"Because we've told him that if he does it any more often than that, we'll take him up a mountain and teach him how to fly without a broom," answered Aletha, poking her husband in the side.

"We're a little off-topic, aren't we?" asked Danger. "What kind of tests are we talking about here?"

"Not everyone bitten by a werewolf becomes a werewolf, you know. There are some standard tests we use to see if someone's been infected – if their blood reacts with silver, for instance."

"And mine didn't?"

"No. You wouldn't know by any chance if you have the typical reaction to touching silver?"

Instead of answering, Remus held out his hand. Danger lifted a hand to one of her ears, then dropped something into her husband's palm. He closed his hand around it for a moment, then picked it up with the fingers of his other hand.

"Well, it would seem not," said Andromeda, looking at what Remus was holding up.

"What is the typical reaction?" asked Sirius.

Remus returned Danger's silver earring to her. "Something along the lines of a chemical burn," he said. "It has stages like burns too, doesn't it? First degree and so on?"

Andromeda nodded. "Were you ever treated for it when you were younger? Before you two met?"

"I only had to get professional treatment once or twice. The other few times, a salve and a bandage worked just fine."

"But – weren't you burnt every time you picked up a Sickle?" asked Aletha, confused.

Remus shook his head. "Sickles aren't real silver. One of the only things werewolf advocacy groups ever managed to do. I think they made the changeover in the 1800's. Every now and again, an old-style Sickle gets into the market, but since it hurts to touch one, if a werewolf did get hold of one, he'd be smart enough to handle the thing with gloves after his first touch."

"All right." Aletha frowned. "Weren't we originally talking about something else? Something we didn't have to worry about or some such?"

"Let me put it this way," said Andy. "If Remus doesn't show up on the tests as a werewolf, I highly doubt he's contagious."

The Pack nodded. "That's good," said Danger. "We've always been careful on full moons, and we should continue to be, but now if this lunk just happens to scrape someone with a tooth, we don't have to go out of our minds worrying."

"So I'm a lunk, am I? Where are you sleeping tonight?"

"Isn't that my threat?"

"Further," said Andy quickly, "my samples from Danger had some interesting reactions to a few of my tests. Reactions very similar to those I get from the Wolfsbane Potion."

Danger nodded slowly. "I suppose that makes sense. It's roughly the same thing happening, after all. I guess."

"You," said Remus firmly, pulling her to his side, "cannot be replaced by a potion, and don't ever think you can."

Andy smiled. "I would, though, be interested," she said, "in a report of comparative experience. Only if you're willing, of course, Remus, and I warn you, the stuff tastes awful."

Sirius looked at her oddly. "How do you know?"

"I volunteered to be part of the test group to be sure it didn't kill ordinary people. It's a bit like biting into an orange peel, except you have to swallow."

Sirius made a face. "Don't bother, Moony," he advised. "You've got the better end of the deal already."

"How does it work?" Remus asked, ignoring Sirius, something at which he was quite good. "Would I have to take it in advance?"

"Our best results have been with two doses, one the day before the full moon and one the day of. I'd provide the potion, it wouldn't cost you anything."

"Money's not an issue," said Remus absently, eyes somewhat unfocused. Aletha knew this meant he was talking silently with Danger. Abruptly he came back to focus and looked at Andy. "I'll do it. Only the once, but I will do it. Would this coming month be all right?"

"That'd be wonderful – have I mentioned lately how much I appreciate all that you're willing to do for my stupid curiosity?"

Remus smiled. "You just did."

The conversation moved onto other topics, such as Dora's Auror training and the cubs' progress at Hogwarts. Andromeda was highly entertained by the revelation of the boys' first prank. "Poor Narcissa," she said at one point. "She's probably rolling over in her grave at the thought of her perfect little son pranking the Slytherin common room."

"No, I'll tell you who'd really be horrified by where Draco is today," said Aletha, grinning. "Lucius Malfoy."

Sirius chuckled. "So true. So very true. I wonder how he is, off in Azkaban?"

"If we're lucky, he's dead, and we never have to worry about him again," said Remus. "But that seems unlikely, since we would have been notified, as his son's legal guardians."

"Are all of you Draco's guardians?" Andy asked.

Danger nodded. "We all signed the contract with Narcissa. Why?"

Andy looked uncertain. "I... don't know if it would hold up in court," she said slowly. "Maybe if you argued that Narcy didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" asked Sirius.

"Didn't know about Remus."

Various annoyed sounds erupted from the Pack.

"I feel stupid now," said Remus, rubbing his forehead as if to ward off a headache. "There's no possible way I could be Draco's legal guardian. We were lucky no one noticed that at the trial – good Lord, my signature on there might even invalidate the whole contract. We're going to have to deal with that."

"Not necessarily," said Andy soothingly. "Even if the worst came to the worst and the court ordered the contract void and appointed a new guardian for Draco, think about the way the wizarding world works. Blood first and foremost. They'd send him to his closest living – and unimprisoned – blood relative."

Aletha smiled. "Who happens to be sitting in this room talking to us."

"Exactly. And then you two," Andy gestured to Sirius and Aletha, "could start proceedings to get his custody transferred back to you. I certainly wouldn't fight you."

"Best case, it never even comes up," said Danger. "Why should it? There really isn't anyone around who's going to fight us. As long as everything stays the way it is, we're safe."

“I’ve heard those words before,” said Sirius, cocking his head as if he was trying to remember something. “When was it... oh, yes, 22 December, 1990. Remember that day?”

Danger rolled her eyes. “Not particularly. But point taken.”

“Maybe, someday, if we get bored, we’ll become a test case,” said Remus. “Either for Draco or Hermione.”

“Hermione?” asked Andy.

“When Danger and I were married, she got Hermione’s custody transferred to both of us under Muggle law. We could see if the magical courts would uphold that.”

“And, if they don’t, it’s no big deal,” finished Danger. “They can’t bar me from living with my husband, or from taking care of my ward.”

Aletha furrowed her brow, thinking. “The only thing is, they might be able to make a case about the child being in danger – and don’t even start, Gertie – and get something out of that. Especially with the other children living in this household. You have to admit, ‘Harry Potter Living in House with Werewolf’ sounds like a headline the Prophet would love to print.”

“But no one who’d tell the press knows,” said Sirius. “Well, other than Snape, and he knows what Dumbledore’d do to his greasy little arse if he told.”

Remus and Danger shot each other a quick look. “There may be someone,” said Remus quietly.

“Who?”

“Do you remember earlier this year, one of the cubs’ letters told us how a Slytherin boy was caught out of bed at midnight by Minerva and docked twenty points for it?”

“Yes – but what does that have to do with the price of puffskeins in Prague?”

Aletha punched Sirius on the arm. "You and your strange figures of speech."

"It matters because that boy was trying to blackmail Harry with the information that I am a werewolf."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"Who was it?" Aletha asked finally.

"Theodore Nott. Which means Patroclus Nott probably knows, since I can't think of any other way an eleven-year-old boy could have found out."

Andy's eyes narrowed. "I do not like Patroclus Nott," she said deliberately. "He is an odious little man with very shifty eyes." She smiled, and Aletha suddenly realized how much Sirius' cousin resembled him. "And I have been looking for an excuse to do something illegal to him for years."

"Are you threatening to Obliviate Patroclus Nott, Healer Tonks?" asked Remus blandly.

"No." Andromeda's smile widened. "I'm promising to."

Sirius leaned back in his chair with a sigh of contentment. "Andy," he said happily, "everyone needs a friend like you."
Dear everyone,

We think Snape suspects it was us who pranked the Slytherin common room – he took twenty points from Gryffindor during Potions today. We're planning to get his quarters next. Any ideas?

I'm not involved in this. I want to go on record with that.

Oh, come off it, Neenie, you were mad at us when we went out without you.

Don't call me that!

I'm not talking. I'm writing.

Don't even write it! It's demeaning!

Maybe I can actually get something written on my own letter while they fight.

Siss has been out of the dorm a lot lately. I think she may have been exploring the hallways on her own. I'm a little worried about her meeting Mrs. Norris, but Siss is fast and smart. She can take care of herself.

Wood's finally started letting me work with the team on passing exercises and such. He was so ashamed that he didn't see that I was in trouble during our first game that he's been treating me like I'm made of china ever since. Fred and George keep asking me to "forget" practice so they can get some work done with the Bludgers, since Wood refuses to let them loose when I'm on the pitch. Maybe I should show him I can outfly a normal one. Any luck finding out why that one came after me like that?

Tell Meghan Neville says yes, he does. He'll write her as usual on Tuesday, but he said she really sounded like she wanted to know right away.

Draco and Hermione are winding down, so I'm going to post this right away – they can write their own letters, I'm sick of them scribbling in mine. Looking forward to the Christmas holidays – I assume we're taking the train home? Oh, and before I forget, can Ron come and stay with us? Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are going to visit Bill in Egypt.

With love,

Harry

P.S. If I drew caricatures of Snape and left them on his desk, would it bother him?

(A/N: Andromeda's really cool, isn't she? Do you like her? How about Siss? Please remember to review, and if you have a question, ask it at the Yahoo group – I check obsessively for posts!)

Chapter 9: Dreams and Desires

Draco finished assembling his flute and set it carefully down on the nearby chair, opening his music folder and pulling out his latest piece. Amy Freeman had sent it along as an early Christmas gift for him, and one of the Pack-parents had copied it so that Luna could learn it as well. With several chromatic notes within the first few bars, it wasn't exactly easy, but Draco knew it was within his capabilities.

He ran through a few quick warm-up exercises, then began to play, imagining Luna sitting at the piano beside him, providing accompaniment with her hands and words with her sweet, delicate voice, invoking the image of snow-covered hills, gleaming treetops, and jingling sleigh bells...

The door opened behind him. Draco, concentrating on getting the high ornamentations in the middle of the song correct, was barely aware of it until something decidedly not white caught his eye – a flash of red hair. Still playing, he turned his head to see Harry and Ron standing in the doorway, listening.

The last note trailed away.

"Early for den much?" asked Harry. "It's only seven o'clock."

"I needed to practice, and this is the safest place to do it."

"Safest?" asked Ron. "What, are you afraid Peeves'll jump out of the wall and bite you?"

"No, I'm afraid Seamus and Dean, or Nott and his little gang, are going to find out I play the flute, and then my name's mud."

"How come? You're good."

"It's different for you. You play the drums. People think that's cool, so you don't have to worry. Or if I was a stuck-up pure-blood, I could claim my family made me take lessons. But I haven't got an excuse – I like playing flute. And if anyone who wasn't Pack found that out..."

“And what if they found out your usual duet partner is a girl?” queried Harry.

“Don’t even make me think about it.”

“I think you just like hiding,” said Ron. “You seem to do a lot of it.”

Draco bristled slightly. “Is that an insult?”

“No.” Ron grinned. “Do you want it to be?”

Draco recognized, belatedly, that he was being teased. So he did the only thing he could do.

He put down his flute on the piano and tackled Ron.

They scuffled on the floor in a friendly sort of way for a moment, more wrestling than really fighting. Harry ran into the nearest bedroom, armed himself, and started beating both of them indiscriminately, and they broke off their fight and teamed up against him.

The scene disintegrated into a full-scale pillow fight, with Hermione, who arrived in the middle of it, gleefully joining in just in time to save Draco from Harry and Ron’s pillow-wielding wrath, and Neville, who arrived somewhere near the end, watching in bewilderment as the teams changed, morphed, merged, and the fight finally ended in a free-for-all with people smacking each other every which way until they all collapsed in exhaustion.

Harry lay on the cushioned floor of the Hogwarts Den’s main room, catching his breath.

“Did you enjoy yourself, eggling?” asked a voice close to his ear.

“Siss!” Harry rolled over and scooped her up, stroking the top of her head. “Where have you been? I haven’t seen you in days.”

“Exploring. I bit the prowling four-legged one when she tried to eat me.”

Harry laughed aloud. "Three cheers for Siss," he said in English. "She bit Mrs. Norris!"

The cubs cheered for the snake, who gave a pleased hiss in response.

"Filch's been grouchy for a couple days," said Ron. "Bet you anything that's why."

"Where did you go after that?" Harry asked Siss, switching back to Parseltongue.

"I explored many rooms. In one I found something that intrigued me. It was like a pond of still water, but it stood upright on legs like a human or a bird."

Harry frowned, puzzled. "How was it like a pond if it was standing up?"

"I could see things in it that were not truly there, things that were only there to the eyes, not to the nose or the tongue..."

"Hold on a second." Harry got up and went into the bathroom, Siss wrapped loosely around his arm. "Like this?" he asked, holding her up so she could see the mirror.

The snake inspected her reflection. "Yes. And yet no. This shows only me, and you, and what is here in the room. The other showed many things that were not there."

It sounded like Siss had found a magical mirror of some sort, Harry thought. "Can you show me where it is?"

"I think I could find my way there again, yes."

"Great! Let's go!"

"Now? Are you sure?"

"Why not?"

"Is it not your night to spend with your nest-group? And do you not have learning in the morning?" Siss' tone took on the motherly sound she often got. "My eggling's curiosity must not overwhelm his need to learn."

Harry very gently flicked her on the tail with his finger. "I have two mothers already – three, if you count Ron's mum. I don't need you nagging me too."

"But I enjoy it. Would you deprive me of what I so love?"

Harry smiled. "No, of course not. Can we go find the mirror this weekend, when I don't have classes?"

"Of course."

"What did you do after you left the room with the mirror?"

"I found a room below the ground, with many human scents, including one like yours, but with much anger and fear in it, and other things you do not have. In that room I found a secret way into this nest of yours. It comes out in that room there." Siss indicated the green bedroom.

"How big of a secret way in?"

"It seems to be made for my people, not yours, eggling. It is very narrow and small, and would be hard for a human to find. No enemies will come that way."

"Good. Will you show it to me anyway?"

"If you like."

No one was much bothered by the fact that Siss was monopolizing him, Harry noticed as he crossed the main room. Ron and Draco were facing off across the chessboard, and Hermione and Neville were sitting at a small table that had appeared over by one wall,

Hermione with a sheaf of parchment in her hand and Neville with one of their schoolbooks.

Hermione, as Harry had long suspected she would be, was top of the year in just about everything, and Neville was, well, not. Harry himself wasn't brilliant, but he could follow most of the lessons, even if he couldn't do the work very well at first. Ron was about par with him, and Draco fell somewhere in between them and Hermione. But Neville seemed to struggle with everything.

Neenie'll help him. She always does.

"So where's this secret way in?" he asked Siss, closing the door of the green bedroom behind him.

"Behind the headboard of the bed," said a voice.

A male voice.

Harry jumped and looked around for the source.

"Don't get all scared, it's just me," said the voice again. It was coming from the wall –

No, it was coming from the picture frame on the wall, which was showing only a green leather chair at the moment...

"Al? You're a Parselmouth?"

"Always have been." Al emerged from behind the frame and sat down. "Why do you ask?"

Harry looked searchingly at the portrait. He knew, or thought he knew, that Parseltongue was an extremely rare gift, distinctive to a certain wizarding family... "Who are you, anyway? Or who were you?"

Al shrugged. "Just an ordinary bloke, not all that much different from you. I lived quite a while ago, but things really haven't changed too much. There were Muggles and wizards back in my time too, and some people thought they were all human, and some people thought

not. I was... caught in the middle, you could say. I ended up siding with the 'all-human-together' crowd, but it cost me... my family was almost all on the other side. My dad, my mum, my big brother Matt..."

Harry sat down on the bed, listening intently. Al's eyes were far away, and Harry got the feeling he didn't talk about this much.

"It wasn't just me, either. My dad and his best friend had a fight over it. A couple of their other friends got in on it too, and when it was all over, my family was gone. Packed up and left. And I stayed here. I never saw them again."

Harry stared at a corner of the picture frame. He couldn't imagine what his life would be like without the Pack. Even being at Hogwarts, he knew where they were, knew that if he needed them they were only an owl or a Floo call away.

"I made my choice, and I still think it was the right one, and all my friends tell me it was the right one." Al looked down at Harry. "But it's still lonely. Even doing the right thing can be lonely sometimes."

Harry nodded, thinking of the years the Pack had spent in hiding, unable to tell even their friends who they really were...

"And now that I've probably ruined your evening with my boring little self-centered rant, why don't you pull the bed out a bit and have a look at the hole your friend came in by."

Harry tugged at the bed until it moved, then went to his knees to look at the wall behind it. Sure enough, there was a hole the size of his hand at floor level, not a chewed or gnawed hole like a pest might leave, but one built into the wall. "Did whoever originally used this room have a pet snake or something?"

"Or something," said Al, looking faintly amused as Harry got to his feet again. "Listen, Harry, it's getting close to Christmas, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"You going home for the holidays?"

Harry nodded.

“Do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Tell Danger Alex says hi.”

“How do you know Danger?” asked Harry, a bit taken aback. “And who’s Alex?”

“It’s a long story, and she can probably tell it better than I can. Besides, I have to get going. Will you tell her that for me?”

“All right.”

“Thanks.” Al hurried out of the portrait, leaving his chair once again the sole occupant of the frame.

“What was that about?” asked Siss. “You changed back to human words after a little while, and I do not understand your language well.”

“I’m a human and I’m not sure I understand it.” Harry recounted Al’s story as best he could.

Siss gave the serpentine wiggle that equated to a shrug. “Disagreements always exist, my eggling. Even within families.”

Harry felt a slight chill. He didn’t want to think of a dispute splitting the Pack, setting them one against another.

The trouble was, now that he’d started thinking of it, he couldn’t stop.

Not even the usual business of a den-night – games, stories, and music, as everyone took a turn choosing Christmas carols – could entirely get the question out of Harry’s mind. Could something happen to the Pack, to make them that angry with each other? Could something split them up so completely that some of them would leave forever?

Al's words kept returning to him.

"My dad, my mum, my big brother... I never saw them again."
In Devon, a man and a woman waited for moonrise.

That stuff leaves a nasty aftertaste, Remus commented from his place on the bedroom floor.

You agreed to it. Danger was sitting across from him, very carefully not touching him.

So does that mean I'm not allowed to complain about it?

Yes.

Fine. In that case, you're not ever allowed to complain about our marriage ever again.

What? Why?

Because you agreed to it.

Danger growled softly, then tensed as the moon began to rise. I really don't like this, she thought to herself. Scientific knowledge or not, we should be together.

But they had both agreed to do this, and she knew Remus would see it through. So it was her bounden duty to do the same.

No matter how much I hate it.

Remus focused on keeping his mind shielded as the change began. He had agreed to this – the more fool, I – and he'd be damned if he'd let Danger see how much pain it was putting him through.

I never quite realized the extent of what she does.

The Wolfsbane Potion changed only the mindlessness of the werewolf. It did nothing to alleviate the physical pain involved in an involuntary change from one form to another. And Remus had never

been fully aware of how much it hurt to transform untamed, because his human mind had always been sublimated beneath the wolf by the time the change was really underway.

Well, now he knew.

It hurts a lot.

He couldn't stop himself from whining somewhat as the change progressed; he was actually rather proud that he'd kept it to that, since his first instinct had been to go for a full-fledged howl.

It feels like all my bones are being reshaped. Not broken – quite – but twisted. And all the muscles with them.

No wonder I always used to wake up feeling like I'd been through a natural disaster. Twice.

Finally, it was over. He was fully wolf, sprawled panting on the floor of the bedroom, aching in every joint. Danger's mind was still sealed to him – she might not be aware it was over yet.

A low whuffle made him look up. The door of the bedroom had opened. A bear-like black dog padded into the room and sniffed at him. I know you, the dog communicated animal-wise. You're that stupid wolf bloke I run around with.

Watch who you're calling stupid, Remus shot back, wincing at the activity required to communicate at that level of intensity.

Cool off, you know I didn't mean it like that. The dog lay down beside him and gently bumped its skull against his.

"You are an idiot," said a well-known voice, tartly but without true anger, and Remus felt strong, long-fingered hands begin to massage his shoulders. "And you are never doing this again. It's too hard on both of you."

He looked foggily up at Aletha. How did she know where I hurt most? he wondered idly, most of his attention going to how wonderful the massage felt.

“The shoulders are the place where the wolf form is least like the human,” said Aletha, digging her fingers deep into his sore muscles. “Because the shoulders don’t bear weight in the human form, but in the wolf form they do. So I thought you might well hurt more there than anywhere else. But don’t worry, I’ll get to some of the other places in a while.”

The Pack takes care of its own, said Sirius in animal-speech. Always.

Remus thumped his tail on the floor in approval of both statements. I wouldn’t mind if she gave me a full-body rub, he told Danger as he felt her presence return. It doesn’t hurt nearly as much now.

Well, there are a few places she’s not allowed to go. They’re mine.

Do I detect a note of jealousy in that precious little voice?

No. Maybe. Yes. Danger’s mental tone was highly loaded – annoyance, concern, fear, worry, and yes, jealousy, were all present. It just feels all wrong that they can touch you and I can’t, tonight of all nights.

I want to be able to give Andy an accurate reading of what it’s like to transform with the Potion, and that means I have to be sure your power isn’t, if you’ll pardon the word, tainting the experiment.

I won’t pardon it. It’s unpardonable. So there. Danger stuck out her tongue at him from across the room.

Remus lifted his head and yawned, displaying his splendid canine tongue. Mine is longer. So there.

Show-off.

True. The Potion does what it’s designed to do splendidly – I never felt a trace of the wolf-mind. Unfortunately, it’s so incredibly complex

already that trying to add a pain-killing aspect to it might well ruin it, and taking any of the more common pain-relieving potions in combination with it might have a bad effect. Something for Andy to look into, if she's so minded.

Aletha was working her way down Remus' front paws, or arms, or whatever, and Sirius was a comfortingly warm presence against his back. Danger might not be able to touch him in body, but she was present in his mind. Meghan had been a bit miffed at missing her usual den-night, but the Pack had promised they would den the next night to make up for it, and the girl had eventually accepted the inevitable and gone to bed.

The upper half of his body felt almost as good as it usually did on a full moon night. Aletha rubbed her hands together for a moment, then started massaging his hips. Sirius gave a loud sigh, and Remus echoed him, feeling the tension sliding out of him as surely as the pain Aletha was wicking away with her clever hands.

Life goes on. Even when we do stupid things.

At least you're willing to admit it, was Danger's comment. When Harry finally fell asleep that night, long after everyone else (Hermione was utterly merciless about enforcing lights-out time in den), he discovered something well-known to his elders; falling asleep with disturbing thoughts was a sure road to bad dreams.

Very bad dreams.

"Draco?" he heard a voice ask. It took him a moment to recognize it as his own – it was high-pitched and wistful. "Why are you going away?"

Draco looked up from the bag he was packing and sighed. He looks older. A couple years older, at least. "I can't explain, Harry. It's too complicated."

"Please?" Harry persisted. The strange duality of dreams took over long enough for him to realize that he, in this dream, had been cast as the little brother – he felt about eight years old to Draco's thirteen. The five days' age difference between them had stretched to five

years. Then he snapped back into single focus, a little boy unhappy that his adored big brother was leaving. "Please try?"

Draco looked torn. "I don't want you to get hurt, Greeneyes," he said, sounding protective in a way Harry had never heard the real Draco be to anyone but Meghan. "I don't want anyone to get hurt. So I have to go. And you have to promise not to tell anyone I went. Do you promise?"

"Will you come back?"

Draco zipped his bag shut. "I can't," he said very softly, so softly Harry had to strain to hear him. "Not unless... no. It won't happen." He stood up. "I can't come back, Harry. I have to go, and keep moving, and not tell anyone where I am. And you have to promise – cross your heart – that you won't tell anyone, not anyone, that I left." He gave a little, bitter, smile. "You won't have to tell them, they'll figure it out. But you have to promise not to tell them anything about when I left, or which way I went. That's the only way everyone can be safe. Do you promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," said Harry unhappily, drawing the X there with his finger. Then he lunged at Draco and hugged him. "I don't want you to go," he muttered into the bigger boy's chest.

"I don't want me to go either," answered Draco quietly, hugging him back. "But I have to." Gently, he pulled Harry off him, picked up his bag, and slung it over his shoulder. "Goodbye." He turned and left the bedroom.

The dream fast-forwarded to another part. Harry was sitting in a big armchair, feeling very scared. Padfoot was pacing around in front of him, looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him. "I don't care if you promised," his godfather growled. "I don't care if he made you swear up and down – don't you understand, his life could depend on this!"

Harry shook his head vehemently. Draco had made him promise. He wasn't going to break his word...

He never even saw Padfoot move. Suddenly he was dangling in midair, his feet off the ground, held aloft by his shoulders and being shaken. "You are going to tell me," Padfoot snarled at him between shakes. "Right now. Or you are going to wish we'd left you with the Muggles!"

"Sirius! Put him down!" a voice shouted from the doorway.

Harry saw something connect with the side of Padfoot's head, an instant before Padfoot yelled in pain and let him go. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he lay there for a moment, gasping for air, listening to Padfoot curse. "Merlin's arse, Letha, that hurt!"

"Good." Letha stormed into the room and glared at Padfoot. "Because terrifying and threatening our only source of information is not going to help anything. Not to mention, he happens to be your godson whom you love. Look at him. Look at him!"

Harry had crawled out of the way as soon as he'd recovered his breath. Now he was hidden in the best place he could find, between the end of the couch and the wall, hoping he wouldn't have to go behind or under the couch. He hated little enclosed places, but anything would be better than going back out there right now.

"Yes, well, my other son, whom I also love, is currently out in the world somewhere. Every minute, every second he's gone he's more at risk – if we don't find him soon, we won't have two sons!"

"And if you don't get your act together, you won't have any sons. Or a wife."

"Is that a threat?"

"It could be. Answer me this. Are you willing to sacrifice Harry for Draco?"

A long silence. Harry pressed his back against the wall, wishing his family was still as solid as the wall was –

And then the wall gave way.

Harry cried out as he fell backwards, tumbling heels over head, down, down, down –

“Harry?”

His eyes snapped open. Ron’s blurry face was looming over him with an expression of worry. “You were yelling, mate. Are you all right?”

“Fine,” said Harry, sitting up, forcing himself to breathe slowly. “I’m fine. It was just a bad dream.”

The rest of his little Pack was gathered around him, not staring at him exactly, but obviously concerned and wanting to be sure he was all right. Harry felt himself flushing a bit. Great, I woke everyone up...

“I got your glasses,” said Neville, handing them over.

“Thanks.” Harry unfolded them and settled them on his face, and immediately felt a bit better. Not being able to see clearly was always a little troubling.

Hermione moved a bit closer to him and scent-touched him, and he returned it. “Was it bad?” she asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

“What was it about?” asked Draco.

Harry looked at his brother – his own age, horribly annoying, but alive and safe – and crossed his fingers behind his back. “I don’t remember.”

There might be no privacy in a Pack, but some things were not meant to be shared.

Then he remembered something that was.

“Who wants to go on an adventure this weekend?” he asked.

Ron's and Draco's hands were up like a shot. Hermione was only an instant behind.

"What kind of adventure?" asked Neville.

"Just a little exploring. Siss found something interesting – I think it's a kind of magic mirror – and I want to have a look at it. She said it reflected things that weren't there."

"Things that weren't there?" repeated Hermione. "That sounds interesting – I wonder if it shows what's happening somewhere else?"

"Or maybe it's like those Muggle visitellions," said Ron.

The cubs groaned. "Televisions, Ron," said Draco. "Honestly, that's like calling the Chudley Cannons the Motley Mannikins..."

Neville dodged as Ron, pillow in hand, flung himself at Draco and started beating the blond boy thoroughly. Of course, Harry and Hermione came to their brother's rescue, and Neville joined in this time, taking Ron's part as the underdog, and by the time they called a truce, Harry had all but forgotten his dream in truth.

It's not like it's ever really going to happen, anyway...

It was, in point of fact, two weeks before the five finally got around to their planned exploration, since all the teachers seemed to have suddenly realized that term was ending and loaded on the homework. Wood, as well, was taking advantage of a sudden mild spell of weather and scheduling extra Quidditch practices, so that Harry was frantically busy for nearly a week and a half before a good hard snow halfway through the last week of classes cooled Wood's ardor – or perhaps what did it was Fred and George sneaking into his dorm and freezing his sheets.

For one reason or another, though, it wasn't until the last day of classes was over that the Pack of five finally had both the time and the energy to sneak out of the dorm at night. Neville was a bit nervous about the whole thing, but every time Harry asked him if he wanted to stay behind he shook his head.

Getting out of the common room was the easy part – no one was really paying attention to anything except their friends and the glorious fact of the holidays ahead, so not even Percy Weasley noticed his little brother and said brother's four friends slipping out of the portrait hole at a time of night they really shouldn't be. It helped, of course, that Draco had bribed Fred and George to "accidentally" set Parvati Patil's robes on fire.

That wasn't very nice to Parvati, said Hermione through the pendant chain she had enlarged and thrown over everyone's shoulders before they put on the Invisibility Cloak, safely down the hall and out of sight of the Fat Lady, who was perfectly capable of blabbing that they had such a treasure.

They didn't hurt her – Percy was right there, he put it out straight away, and now he gets to do the prefect thing and scold Fred and George, said Ron. So we're really making three people happy. Fred and George get to tweak Percy's nose, and Percy gets to yell at them for it.

Imagining the twins literally tweaking Percy's nose, Harry felt an overwhelming urge to laugh. "Which way, Siss?" he said instead.

"It is down some floors. Near the place of many tree-story-things which your sister loves so. That would be a good place to start."

Heading for the library, everyone, Harry broadcast, and the group set off.

"You must let me move on my own," Siss told Harry when they reached the library. "So that I can find my own scent-trail and follow it."

Harry put the snake on the ground. She cast about for a moment, flicking her tongue, then slithered away to the left, and the Gryffindors followed her, Neville offering silent apologies as he trod on people's feet.

They turned here and there, passing snoozing portraits and a suit of armor, following the tip of Siss' retreating tail, until finally she turned

right and slid through a half-open door. "This is the room," she hissed. "I smell no one else here. You will be safe to take off your camouflage."

Right in here, Harry told everyone, and Ron pushed the door open wide enough to admit them all. Once inside, they took the Cloak off, and Hermione folded it neatly as Draco shut the door behind them.

"It's big," said Neville, looking at what Siss had found.

It was big. As tall as the ceiling, set in an ornate gold frame with two clawed feet at the bottom, the mirror had an inscription carved at the top. Harry squinted up at it, wishing the light was a little better.

"Lumos," said Hermione behind him, and the light abruptly was better.

Should have thought of that.

"Erised stra ehru oyt..." Ron tried to sound out the lettering. "That's not English."

"Ube cafru oyt on wohsi," Draco finished. "No, it isn't. But it isn't anything else I've ever heard of either."

"Maybe it's code," said Harry, reading it over again. Something about the words bothered him, as if he ought to know how to make them make sense, but he just couldn't think of it...

Neville, looking at the ornamentations in the frame, stepped in front of the mirror to get a closer look. Harry saw him glance at his reflection and do a classic double-take.

"Neville?"

Neville didn't move.

"Neville, what's wrong?"

Silence. The cubs and Ron traded baffled looks. Neville was staring into the mirror, and as Harry watched, his hand rose and touched the

glass, above his reflection's head and to the right. Then again, a bit higher this time, on the left.

"Siss, what kind of things did you see when you looked in the mirror?" asked Harry without taking his eyes off Neville.

"Strange things. My sire and dam, and some of my nest-mates. Hesseh. You, eggling, speaking to them. I did not understand."

"I don't understand either."

Neville made an odd sort of sound, a sniffing hiccup, and Harry saw with a little shock that his friend's eyes were tearing up. The other boy had both hands flat against the glass now, his nose almost pressed against it, as if he were hoping to fall through it somehow...

Moved by an impulse he didn't quite understand, Harry stepped forward and placed a hand on Neville's shoulder.

Neville jumped as if Harry had given him an electric shock. "They're gone!" he said, scanning the mirror almost frantically. "You made them go away!"

"Who?" asked Harry.

"My parents! They were there, standing one on either side of me, I could see them, and now they're gone! Didn't you see them?"

Harry shook his head. "All I saw was you," he said, turning to the rest of the group for confirmation. Nodding heads greeted him.

"But – I know I saw them..." Neville looked as if he were going to cry.

"Maybe it only works on one person at a time," said Ron. "Let me have a look?"

Neville nodded, and he and Harry got out of the way so that Ron could stand in front of the mirror.

Ron stared transfixed at his image. "It's me – but I look older – and I'm head boy!" he said excitedly. "I'm wearing the badge and everything! And I'm Quidditch captain, too – I've got the house cup and the Quidditch cup – do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"I... don't think it can," said Draco slowly. "Let me have a go?"

Ron looked reluctant, but relinquished his place, and Draco stepped in front of the mirror. Whatever he saw, it made him take a step back. "Definitely not the future," he said, still staring. "Or the past. I don't think what it shows is even real."

"What do you see?" Hermione asked.

Draco shook his head, turning away. "Nothing important. Do you want a turn, Harry?"

Harry was about to nod when an urgent hiss from the floor attracted his attention. "Someone comes! The night-walking one, who owns the prowler, he comes!"

"Filch!" hissed Harry, snatching the Cloak from under Hermione's arm. They all dived underneath it, just in time, as Argus Filch, the castle caretaker, crashed the door open.

"Found you!" he snarled, before noticing the room was empty. Harry had a hard time keeping his laughter under control at the look on Filch's face, and from the stifled noises emanating from Ron, he wasn't the only one.

"Know you're in here," muttered Filch, peering around the room, behind the stacked desks and chairs, coming once within a few inches of stepping on Harry's toes. "Out of bed, wandering around, making trouble, making noise..."

Harry had both hands over his mouth. Hermione was "assisting" Ron and Neville with one hand apiece. Draco appeared to be holding his breath.

"Must have nipped out just in time," grumbled Filch finally, turning to leave. "I'll get you next time, never think I won't..."

The door closed behind him. The young Pack relaxed.

"We should get out of here," said Harry firmly. "That was too close."

"But I didn't get a turn," protested Hermione.

"And I want another go," said Ron.

"No." Harry was sure. "Filch could come back any minute. We need to get out of here. Come on." With Draco's help, he managed to get the other three moving, and somehow they made it back to Gryffindor Tower without getting caught.

Hermione, looking sulky, went straight up the girls' stairs without even saying good night. Neville hurried up the boys', still looking rather distressed. Ron perched on the arm of one of the chairs, grinning. "Head boy," he said happily. "And Quidditch captain."

"Be nice if you could do it," said Draco. "Lot of work, though."

"Yeah... I think I'll go to bed. See if I can't dream of that."

"Good night," said Harry as Ron headed for the stairs. He looked down at Siss. "Quite a strange thing you found," he remarked.

"This place is full of strange things. I am sure there are many more left to find." Siss wound her way up his arm to the shoulder, under the sleeve of his pajamas.

"I'm sure you're right." Harry looked over at Draco, who was staring into the fire. "Want to tell?" he asked quietly. "Just the two of us?"

Draco's face became the utterly calm mask he used when he was hiding something. "Nothing interesting," he said.

Harry disagreed with one of Padfoot's favorite expressions.

“Better not let Letha and Danger hear you say that or they’ll wash your mouth out.”

Harry grimaced. “With laundry soap.”

“Or with a Scourgify. Or maybe both.”

“Both, gah, double trouble. But I still want to know.”

Draco slid to the floor and lay on the hearthrug, heels in the air, staring into the fire, in a pose Harry found reminiscent of the first time he’d ever seen the boy who had become his brother...

“It was my parents,” said Draco finally, so quietly Harry could barely hear him over the crackles and pops of the fire. “My blood parents. Lucius and Narcissa. But they looked different than they do in the pictures. They weren’t stuck-up or proud. They were... smiling at me. Nice smiles. They looked...”

Harry waited.

“They looked like they loved me.”

“Your mum did love you,” said Harry after another long pause, not sure he was doing right, but wanting to say something, anything, to break the silence, which was becoming very uncomfortable.

“I know. But... it’s not that there’s anything wrong with the Pack, there isn’t, I love the Pack, you know that. But I can’t help thinking. What if it hadn’t had to happen? What if my father,” the word sounded like a curse, “hadn’t been such a bloody fool? What if he’d been decent? What if I’d had the chance to grow up with them instead of with the Pack?”

Harry didn’t know how to answer this, but Draco didn’t seem to expect an answer. Instead he came down and sat beside Draco, watching the fire, which was burning low in the grate. “We should go to bed,” he said after a few minutes. “We have to be up in time for the train tomorrow.”

“All right.” Draco sat up.

Harry brushed two fingers down his own cheek, then reached over to tap Draco’s. “Dream well,” he said.

“You too.” Draco returned the gesture.

The brothers climbed the stairs to bed.

“Mrs. Longbottom, it’s good to see you, I was hoping you’d be here,” said Aletha the next day at King’s Cross, shaking Augusta Longbottom’s hand. “We’re hoping you and Neville can come to our Christmas party – here’s the invitation, just to make it formal, and so you don’t forget – it’s the 27th at our house, it starts at four and lasts until we all get tired and go home.”

“We would be delighted,” said Mrs. Longbottom, glancing at the invitation card and slipping it into her handbag. “I’ll be sending you a more formal acceptance when I get home, of course, but as long as there is no previous engagement, which I believe is the case, I accept with pleasure.”

“Neville!” cried Meghan with delight as the boy appeared from the barrier with Ron Weasley beside him. She darted forward and embraced him, making him blush a bit, but he hugged her back.

“Thanks for all the letters,” he said, smiling at her. “Sorry I didn’t write more.”

“It’s all right, you’re busy – and you never forgot all the way. Even if you didn’t write on your own, you’d ask Harry or Hermione to say hello in theirs.”

“Hello, Mrs. Freeman-Black,” said Ron, parking his trolley near her. “Harry and the others are coming, the line’s just moving slow. Where’s everyone else?”

“Danger stopped at a bookstore along the way, and Remus stayed to keep her from buying anything she can’t afford. They should be along soon. And I’m really not sure where Sirius is...”

“Right behind you,” said her husband’s voice as his arms slid over her shoulders. “Any sign of the cubs?”

“Ron says they’re coming – ah, there they are.”

Harry’s untidy black mop and Draco’s sleek pale head emerged from the crowd, with Hermione’s brown bushy mass beside them. All three were pushing or pulling trolleys, Harry’s with Hedwig in her cage on top of his trunk. Aletha waved, and Harry caught sight of her and waved back, pointing her out to the other two.

“Did we miss anything?” asked Remus, arriving on the scene, slightly out of breath, with Danger behind him, holding a plastic bag with the booksellers’ name on it.

“No, here they are,” was all Aletha had time to say before three trolleys bumped to a halt in front of her, and she was suddenly faced with a dilemma – who to hug first.

Harry solved it for her by homing in on her as if she’d Summoned him.

“Oof – I’m glad to see you, too, Greeneyes, but you need to let me breathe,” she said jokingly, hugging him back. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really,” she felt, more than heard, since his face was pressed against her shoulder. He pulled away to look up at her. “I’m just glad to be home.”

“And we’re glad to have you,” said Aletha, kissing him on the forehead, then scent-touching him. “Come on, the Weasleys left us their car to use while they’re in Egypt. Let’s get this holiday under way.”

And have we ever got a surprise for you at home...

(A/N: Do you like the way I incorporated the story Al(ex) told Harry into Harry’s dream? And do you really believe that dream will never come up again? If so, I have a bridge to sell you... Speculations, as always, gladly accepted on Yahoo group, and please don’t forget to review! And, in case you didn’t know this, I didn’t write “White Christmas”).)

Chapter 10: Surprises of All Kinds

Harry had never been so glad to see the Den. Of course, he'd never been away from it for so long before.

"Boys, you're bunking in the den room," said Padfoot as the boys helped him and Moony haul their trunks out of the boot of the car.

Harry looked at his godfather in surprise. "Why not upstairs in our room?"

"There isn't enough room," said Moony, shutting the boot. "Not with the guests."

"Guests?" asked Draco. "Don't you mean, a guest?" He indicated Ron.

Moony gave his most annoying "I've got a secret" smile and didn't answer.

Letha was already most of the way inside with Hermione's trunk hovering beside her. Danger levitated Ron's, Moony took Draco's, and Padfoot pointed his wand at Harry's. "Locomotor Trunk," he incanted.

I want a ride, Harry decided, and before the trunk could rise, he quickly sat down on it. The spell lifted him and the trunk off the ground together.

Padfoot gave him the "and what do you think you're doing, young man" look. It worked better for Letha, Harry thought.

"Get off," said Padfoot finally after a few moments of nothing happening.

Harry stayed put, swinging his booted feet cheekily. I don't want to. It's very comfortable here.

"You heard me."

I heard you. I'm just not obeying you.

“Last chance.”

Not a chance.

“Fine, you asked for it.” Padfoot twiddled his wand.

The trunk rose a bit higher off the ground, until Harry’s knees were about level with Padfoot’s eyes. Then it began to move.

Uh-oh. Harry held on tight.

It felt like riding a broomstick which didn’t like you and had decided to try and buck you off. The trunk did spins, abrupt motions forward, backward, and sideways, even up and down, and once, memorably, almost did a barrel roll, but reversed itself just as Harry felt his grip slipping. Finally, after about a minute, Padfoot lowered him to the ground. “Had enough?” he enquired.

Harry dismounted, made sure his legs would hold him, and gave his godfather his most charming smile. “That was fun,” he said breezily. “Do it again?”

Padfoot chortled. “I’d believe you more if your eyes weren’t crossed. Inside with you, if you can see where the door is.”

Of course I can see where the door is. It’s... over there. Harry made his way, a trifle unsteadily, up the path and into the Den, stumbling only once and catching himself before he fell. Padfoot followed with his trunk.

The warmth inside the house helped to dispel a bit of Harry’s dizziness. He pulled his coat off and hung it on the rack in the corner, stood his boots under the rack, and walked carefully through the living room into the den room, where a rather strange sight greeted him.

Ron was white. All white, all over. He looked a bit like a ghost, or like he’d walked into a bakery at the wrong moment.

"The beds are pranked," said Draco by way of a hello. "Ron sat down on his and this happened."

Harry looked at the three beds sitting side by side. "Which one's yours, Ron?"

"This one," said Ron, pointing at the one farthest from Harry. "You're in the middle, Draco's on the other end."

"Did someone tell you that, or did you pick?"

"We picked."

"So they're probably all done the same." Harry went to his trunk, which Padfoot had left in the living room, and opened it. He extracted a shoe and came back to the den room. "Let me try something."

He tossed the shoe onto the middle bed. With a small crack, a cloud of flour appeared over the bed, coating it, and the shoe, thickly.

"I get it," said Draco, picking up the shoe. "And now..."

He repeated Harry's act on his own bed, triggering the charm without getting himself covered in flour.

"Welcome home," said Danger, appearing in the kitchen doorway of the den room. "Sorry you were the only one who got caught by it, Ron, we were hoping you'd all three get it. Hold still." She flicked her wand around the room. "Scourgify!"

The flour was gone, and Ron looked more or less normal again. "Don't worry about it," he said. "That's nothing compared to what Fred and George usually do."

Danger rolled her eyes. "Do yourselves, and me, a favor, and don't repeat that in front of Padfoot and Moony. They'll feel like their titles of worst pranksters ever are in jeopardy, and you children and Aletha and I are the closest targets. I'm hoping for a peaceful holiday, with as few pranks as possible – am I getting through here, boys?" she asked Harry and Draco pointedly.

“Yes, Danger,” they said in semi-respectful not-quite-unison.

“Can I go to the Lovegoods’?” added Draco.

“You can go, I’m fairly sure the Floo still works...”

Draco sighed. “May I go to the Lovegoods’, please?”

“You may. But I don’t see why you’d bother, when Luna’s upstairs.”

Draco hurried out of the room without saying another word.

“Are the beds safe to sit on now?” Harry asked Danger.

“Yes, they’re safe. No more pranks today.” She came over and gave him a quick hug. “I’m glad you’re home, Greeneyes,” she said quietly, before returning to the kitchen.

“You have a really interesting family,” observed Ron as he went to pull his trunk into the den room.

“I know.” Harry joined his friend. They got Ron’s trunk into the room and stowed it at the foot of his bed, caught their breath, and went back for Harry’s.

“Does Draco like Luna?” asked Ron when they had pulled Harry’s trunk into the room as well.

Harry nodded, opening his trunk to put his shoe back in. “Why wouldn’t he like her?”

“No, I mean does he like like her.” The emphasis on the word this time made Ron’s meaning unmistakable.

“Does he like like her?” Harry chewed on his lip, thinking. “I don’t know, really. I mean, he likes her, but I don’t know if he like likes her.” He shrugged. “Let’s get his trunk while we’re doing them.”

They shoved Draco's trunk into the room as well, then sat down on his bed.

"D'you want to go upstairs?"

"All right."

Draco appeared on the landing as they crossed the living room. "Ron," he said, looking confused. "I thought Ginny was going with your parents to visit Bill."

"She was. She is. I mean, she did. I think. Why?"

"Because there's four girls in that bedroom, not three, and one of them has red hair."

"Surprise," said Letha with a warm smile, descending the stairs. "Ginny's been a bit ill, and even though she's not contagious any more, your mother didn't want to risk her health traveling, so we offered to let her stay for the holiday."

Ron looked as if he couldn't decide whether to be happy or annoyed.

"Should we go up and say hello, then?" asked Harry.

"If you like. No rough games, but you know that. Just be the gentlemen I know you can be when it suits you." Letha ruffled Harry's hair as she passed and fake-punched Draco in the jaw.

The boys climbed the stairs and went down the hall past the guest bedroom and Padfoot and Letha's room to the cubs' room. Harry knocked on the closed door. "Come in!" Hermione's voice called.

Harry opened the door. Hermione, Meghan, and Luna were gathered around the bed closest to the wall, which contained Ginny Weasley. Her nose was slightly red, but she looked otherwise all right. "Hi, Ginny," he said. "I hope you're feeling better."

Ginny nodded, then knocked the box of tissues that was sitting on the nightstand to the floor and had to bend down to get it, coming back up with a face to match her nose.

"Hello, boys," said Luna, standing up from where she had been sitting. "Happy Christmas."

"Thanks," said Ron. "You too."

"Luna, do you want to work on that song my aunt sent us?" asked Draco.

Luna nodded. "I think so."

"Great. See you later, Ginny, I hope you feel better." Draco turned and left the room, Luna following.

"You ruin everything," said Ron disgustedly to his sister. "Like that time when you were four, when you were sick all over Dad's new robes?"

Ginny turned even redder. "That wasn't my fault! Fred and George fed me something gross they came up with! And what about the time when you were six that you tried to fly off the roof with the broom Mum uses on the kitchen floor and broke your leg?"

It was Ron's turn to blush. "How was I supposed to know all brooms didn't fly? And what about the time..."

Harry sat down on one of the other beds in the room and listened intently. When Hermione and Meghan joined the fracas on Ginny's side, he joined in to help Ron, and they threw embarrassing stories at each other until Letha came to get them all for dinner.

Ginny spent most of the meal looking at her plate, and when it was over, she, Hermione, and Meghan (Luna had gone home with promises to come over again tomorrow) went back upstairs and shut the door. "I think, if we'd let them, they'd put a big sign on the door," said Danger. "No Boys Allowed. This Means You."

“Does that mean we have to do the dishes?” asked Draco, looking at the laden table with distaste.

“Not tonight. It’s your first night home – or your first night here for you, Ron – so I’ll let you off. But tomorrow, yes.”

“Anyone for a game of chess?” Ron asked.

“Me,” said Harry quickly.

“I’ll play winner,” said Draco.

“Or,” said Letha casually, “you could go see what’s going on in the music room.”

Something in her tone made Harry curious. He turned and went down the small hallway to the music room.

And froze in the doorway, causing Ron to run into him from behind.

There was a lion standing in the middle of the room.

Ron made a kind of whimpering noise. Harry’s brain seemed to have frozen.

Lion. Big lion. Male lion – nice mane –

A huge, bear-like black dog was also surveying the lion from one side, and suddenly Harry understood.

“Moony!” he said, just as his Pack-father became human again, a process that took slightly longer than when Padfoot did it and left Harry blinking, unsure if he’d actually seen the transformation in progress or not.

“You did it!” said Draco excitedly. “You’re an Animagus!”

“Not quite yet,” said Moony, rolling his shoulders as Padfoot also transformed back to human. “That was really the first time I’ve been

able to transform right away, without stalling on some part of it. When I can do it every time, and not get stuck anywhere, then I'm really an Animagus. But that's just a matter of practice."

"How are Danger and Letha doing?" Harry asked, wondering if it would be rude to ask to see the transformation again.

"Letha's almost there as well. Danger's still having a bit of trouble getting into wolf shape reliably. She'll get it, though, it just takes time." Moony looked at Ron. "Now you know one of our biggest family secrets," he said with a smile. "We're all studying to be registered Animagi."

"Wow," said Ron, looking suitably impressed.

"Can we see it again?" asked Harry, making up his mind.

"If I can do it again. I make no guarantees." Moony closed his eyes, and Harry saw the man's lips move for a moment. Then the majestic lion was standing there again.

"Very nice, Moony," said Padfoot approvingly. "That was smoother, and – did you use the incantation at all?"

The human Moony reappeared. "Just the end of it."

"That's excellent. When you don't need it at all, that's when you're really set."

"We're going to learn too," Harry told Ron quietly as the men discussed theory. "When we're thirteen. They promised to teach us, as long as we don't use the animal forms to get in trouble."

Ron sighed enviously. "Wish I could learn."

"We'll teach you," said Draco matter-of-factly. "Once we learn how."

"Or maybe you can learn with us," said Harry. He grinned. "If we threaten them with teaching you ourselves. Think it would work again, Draco?"

Draco grinned back. "It worked once."

"Do you boys want to find out what your Animagus forms would be if you learned?" asked Padfoot, breaking into their conversation.

Three heads nodded eagerly.

"To the bathroom, then." Padfoot pointed the way.

The small ground floor bathroom was a bit crowded with five people in it, but they managed. "Have your wands on you?" asked Moony.

Harry produced his, as did Draco. Ron had to go get his from his trunk. "Didn't think I'd need it," he explained when he got back. "Since we're not allowed to do magic outside school."

"We'll cover for you, this once," said Padfoot. "The spell is simple. Revelaro Animalis. Cast it on the mirror, then look into it. You should see different kinds of animals running by. One of them will eventually stop running and make eye contact with you. That one is your form. Who wants to go first?"

"I'll do it," said Harry. Everyone made room for him, and he raised his wand. "Revelaro Animalis!"

The mirror stopped reflecting the room and became filled with fog. Harry stared into it. The fog cleared away very slightly, revealing animals running past, just as Padfoot had said – a black dog, a black horse, a tawny lion, a red fox, a brown stag, a gray cat... a brown-and-red hawk and a white owl flew past, followed by a tiny, glistening speck that could have been some kind of beetle... a white fox this time, a large reddish-orange wildcat, a cat with orange and black markings on its white fur, and then a wolf...

The wolf turned and looked at him. Its fur was dark grey, almost black, except for a marking on its forehead in lighter grey, shaped like a lightning bolt – and it had green eyes –

The spell was broken. Harry was staring at his own reflection in the mirror.

“Well?” demanded Draco.

“A wolf,” said Harry, stepping away from the mirror. “Like Danger turned me into last year. It had my scar and my eyes and everything.”

“Cool. Ron, you want to go next?”

“No, you can go.”

Draco cast the spell and stared into the mirror, which to Harry’s eyes was the same as ever. Draco, though, looked fascinated by what he saw, tracking invisible things along their paths, until finally something caught his attention and held it.

“Fox,” he said when the spell was broken. “A white fox. Again, like what Danger did. I wonder if Neenie’ll be a cat?”

Ron stepped up to the mirror and cast the spell. His took only a moment, and he took a step back from the mirror, looking amazed and almost frightened. “A hawk,” he said in an awed whisper. “A big brown hawk with red feathers down its wings!”

“Wicked,” said Draco in tones of admiration. “You’d be able to fly without a broom!”

“Useful if you’re in a Quidditch match against Slytherin,” said Harry. “If one of them took your broom out, you could transform and get to the ground without getting hurt.”

“If you became an Animagus in school, that is,” interrupted Moony politely. “But since that’s dangerous, not to mention illegal, I’m sure none of you boys would even dream of doing it. Right?”

The boys nodded solemnly.

The pattern for the holiday was more or less set by the first day. The boys and the girls stayed rather separate, except when Luna came over, in which case Draco spent nearly all his time with her. Letha

moved the piano into the living room when this happened, so that Harry and Ron could sit by the fireplace in the music room for hours, eating anything they could wheedle out of Danger that fit on a toasting fork – English muffins and marshmallows were their particular favorites – and talking idly about how to prank Snape and the Slytherins. They had no idea what the girls did upstairs all day, and frankly didn't care much.

They played outside sometimes – this, the girls did join them in, except Ginny, who was still prohibited from outdoor play because of her lingering cough. She watched them from the bedroom window, which Harry and Ron were careful to snowball every few minutes, just to let her know she wasn't forgotten.

The number of packages under the Christmas tree (in the music room this year, since the boys were sleeping in the den room) grew as Christmas Day drew nearer. By Christmas Eve, there were at least ten for every person staying at the Den, including Ron and Ginny, whose presents had all been dropped off by their parents before the Weasleys left for Egypt. Harry was rather interested in the contents of a flat box addressed to all four cubs in Amy Freeman's handwriting.

Christmas Day dawned late, as was its nature, but no one in the Den waited for the sun. By nine o'clock, all the presents had been opened, and Harry was helping Danger fix breakfast for everyone.

Mrs. Weasley, it turned out, had made all four cubs Weasley sweaters like the ones she made her own children. Harry had swapped his green one for Ron's maroon, knowing his friend's dislike of the color.

"She always puts a letter on Fred and George's," said Ginny, regarding her navy blue sweater as Danger delivered her porridge. "But I'm sure half the time they change them around."

"Mum caught them wearing the wrong letters once," recalled Ron. "They claimed they thought it stood for their middle names."

“Ron, d’you want a red one instead of green?” asked Draco, holding up his crimson sweater.

“Sure – toss it over here.”

Draco tossed, and Ron caught, just in time to keep the sweater from landing in the cornflakes Harry had handed him a few moments before.

The flat box Harry had been wondering about turned out to be a game.

“Wizard’s Monopoly,” Hermione read off the colorful box. “Instructions inside.”

The game sounded complicated, Harry thought, but Ron listened eagerly as Hermione read the instruction pamphlet aloud, and everyone else seemed at least interested. (The adults had retreated to the kitchen, leaving the music room populated solely by four cubs, two Weasleys, piles of presents, and mountains of wrapping paper.)

“Should we try it?” asked Meghan.

“How about after we have Christmas dinner,” said Harry, getting up. “Danger asked me if I’d help her in the kitchen.”

“And I want to try out my new chess set,” said Draco. “Ron, you want a game?”

“Let me get my men.” Ron got up and left the room.

“I’m going to read, then,” announced Hermione. She opened *The Ordinary Princess* to the first page and was immediately lost to the world.

“Ginny, will you help me do my face?” asked Meghan, a little shyly, proffering the “Little Glamour Witch” make-up kit she’d received.

“Of course I will.” Ginny took the kit from Meghan and removed the lid as Ron came back into the room, his chessmen doing limbering-up exercises in their open box.

“Don’t just do something, stand there,” said Danger briskly, following Ron into the room and handing Harry an apron. “There’s loads to do if we’re going to eat at any time approaching noon.”

Harry smiled as he tied the apron strings behind him.

That’s what she says every year.

And we always manage somehow.

He followed his Pack-mother back to the kitchen, feeling happier than he could really account for. Nothing spectacular had happened, he hadn’t received any presents he’d really wanted – of course, there weren’t any presents he really wanted –

But do you need a reason to be happy?

I think I’ll just enjoy it and not ask why.

And then he was in the kitchen, and everything was organized chaos, and he lost himself happily in the swirl of preparing Christmas dinner. After dinner and the resulting clean-up, they did play Wizard’s Monopoly – all of them. It turned out to be the sort of game that ten people could play at a time, and so they did.

“I got you the British set, so the money’s the type you’re used to, Galleons and such-like,” said Amy’s accompanying note. “The pieces will tell you if you make a really big mistake. Just have fun.”

The object of the game was to accumulate money and property and bankrupt your opponents without going bankrupt yourself. The squares on the board were named after famous places in the British wizarding world – Harry was lucky and landed on the dark blue square labeled “Hogwarts” his first time around the board, and bought it straight away for 200 Galleons. Moony bought “Hogsmeade”, the other dark blue property, for 175 Galleons on his next turn, and

thereafter the two of them tried to make all sorts of outrageous deals to get the other to give up that property, since unless you had all of a color – a monopoly – you couldn't build things on it to get more money.

Ron was the first to get a monopoly – the three red squares on the opposite corner of the board from the dark blue, emblazoned with the names of famous Quidditch pitches – and Draco was the first to go bankrupt, landing on them the turn after Ron had bought himself four broomsticks and a shed. "I'm going out for a walk," he announced, handing all his money over to Ron.

"Are you," said Danger lazily from her chair by the fire, her small loom on her lap and her hands busy with heddle and shuttle. She was playing by proxy, having Moony take her turns for her.

"I mean, may I please go out for a walk."

"Yes, you may. Don't go far, and be back in about twenty minutes."

Draco nodded and went to get his coat.

It was a cold, crisp evening, with only a few clouds in the sky. A pinprick of light caught Draco's eye as he shut the door behind him, and his lips were moving before his brain caught up.

"Star light, star bright,

"First star I see tonight..."

He stopped, feeling a little silly, but then shrugged. No one's here to hear me, I might as well finish.

"I wish I may, I wish I might

"Have the wish I wish tonight."

Now, what do I want to wish for?

He walked slowly down the path, never taking his eyes from the star.

"I wish I could see my father," he said aloud, but very quietly. "I wish I could meet him, and talk to him. Just for a little while. Just to see what he's like."

You know what he's like, said part of his mind. You've heard it in den-night stories, you remember it yourself. He's a mean, cruel, evil bastard who deserves everything he's getting.

But am I sure? argued another part. I was only a baby when I knew him. And I don't think the Pack's lied to me, but they might have... bent the truth, or only told me parts of it. Or there might be another side to the story, one I've never heard. There might be reasons for the things he did.

Reasons. Right, said the first part of his mind – and now that he listened, it sounded a lot like Harry. Reasons for him to murder and torture people?

Shut up.

Harry had it easy, thought Draco moodily, kicking at clumps of snow. He knew what his father had really been like – he had it on authority from the man's best friends, for Merlin's sake. There would be no unpleasant surprises in his brother's future.

My brother. I call him that without even thinking about it most of the time. What would my father say if he found out? He wanted us to be brothers too...

I wish I knew.

Of the three boys sleeping in the den room that night, one already knew that wishes were powerful. A second would learn it several years in the future.

The third was scheduled to learn it tonight.

Harry walked the halls of Hogwarts, only mildly surprised to be there. He knew where he was going – the room with the mirror in it. He wanted to see what would happen when he looked in it.

As he passed the suit of armor, he heard a groan of frustration. A familiar groan.

“Hermione?” he called, turning into the room.

His sister looked at him with a grimace on her face. “All those books,” she said. “And I can’t read any of them! Because they’re in a mirror – so they’re all backwards! Agh!” She stormed past him, out of the room. Harry watched her go, then approached the mirror himself.

Backwards. Something about that was tickling his brain. Backwards.

He looked up at the lettering at the top of the mirror, and suddenly it clicked. Those letters don’t make any sense forwards – but what if they’re written backwards?

He looked around, and sure enough, parchment, ink and quill were sitting on top of one of the unused desks. He uncapped the ink, dipped the quill, and began to write the letters backwards, not bothering to leave spaces between them. I’ll figure it out later.

When he finished, he looked at what he had. “I show not your face,” he read aloud slowly, “but your heart’s desire.”

Heart’s desire. Suddenly, it all made sense. Neville wants to know his parents – Ron wants to be special, better than his brothers – Draco wishes he could have known his blood parents –

He snickered. And Hermione wants books – what a big surprise.

He set aside the parchment and stood up. Time to find out what I want.

Harry Potter stepped in front of the Mirror of Erised and gazed into its depths.

Draco didn’t really know where he was. Or what he was doing there.

He stood on the edge of a cliff. The wind tugged at him, pushing him first back towards safety, then forward towards the drop. He could hear and smell the sea far below. He was dressed all in black and held his flute in one hand.

Impulsively, he lifted it to his mouth and began to play, one of Moony's favorite melodies, a father's farewell to a beloved child. As the last note faded, a voice spoke from behind him.

"Well played," it said, in a tone that lingered annoyingly between mocking and sincere.

Draco turned and found himself face to face with his father.

There could be no mistake. They could have been snapshots of the same person, taken 25 years apart. The older man, too, wore all black, though his hands were empty. He was impeccably groomed, just as Draco's fuzzy childhood memories had him, and he was staring at his son with – was it distaste? Draco's stomach twisted.

"Sir," he acknowledged the man, giving the small, formal bow Padfoot had taught them.

"Who are you?" Lucius Malfoy asked bluntly.

Draco stared at the man, astonished. "Sir – don't you know me?"

"I know who you appear to be, boy. I want to hear it from your own mouth. Who are you?"

"My name is Draco, sir. I'm eleven. I'm a first year at Hogwarts."

Malfoy nodded stiffly. "What house claims you?"

"Gryffindor, sir."

The man's face contorted with anger, and he looked off into the distance. "The insolent dog spoke truly, then," he said softly. He looked back at Draco. "And I suppose you use the surname Black."

“Yes, sir.”

“What is that thing in your hand?”

“My flute, sir. I play.”

“Yes, I heard you. Tell me, do you also sing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sing something for me.”

Draco looked around, uneasily. The sky was dark and getting darker.

“Now, sir?”

“Now, sir?” Malfoy mocked. “Yes, boy, of course now. Unless you have somewhere else to be.”

Draco bit his lip, trying to think of something he could sing that wouldn't offend this obviously touchy man.

It's Christmas. I'll do a Christmas carol.

He sang a verse of Padfoot's favorite, “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” and was rewarded with something like a smile on Malfoy's face. “Very nice,” the man said. “Very nice indeed. And quite in the spirit of the season. Tell me, Draco, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, sir. I mean, I think I do.”

“Then tell me. Who do you think I am?”

Draco tried not to swallow visibly. “I think, sir, that you're Lucius Malfoy, my birth father.”

“Very good. I see they haven't tried to make you forget me. Do you remember me?”

“Only a little, sir.”

“And what do you remember of me?”

Draco wanted to back up, but the only thing behind him was the cliff edge. “I remember being afraid, sir,” he answered quietly, but without dropping his eyes from Malfoy’s face. “I remember being afraid of you.”

Malfoy nodded, an expression of satisfaction appearing on his features. “Good. I’m glad you haven’t forgotten everything. It will make you easier to train when I reclaim you.”

Draco almost did take a step back. “Re-reclaim me?”

“Of course. When the Dark Lord returns. And he will return, Draco, make no mistake. He will return. And when he does, I shall be rewarded – and for my reward, I will ask for only one thing. You.”

All right. This was officially a very bad idea.

Draco looked around for places to go and found none – he was on an outcrop of the cliff, Malfoy could reach him if he tried to run either way, and behind him there was nothing but the empty air...

“I will have you again,” said Malfoy, now moving forward, taking deliberate steps, and seemingly enjoying the fear Draco knew was on his face, as hard as he was trying to control it. “Remember that, and think about coming to me willingly. It would make things so much easier for both of us. I would, of course, have to insist that you give up this strange hobby of music. The flute, perhaps, I would allow you to keep, but the singing – by no means.”

“What if I don’t want to?” asked Draco, proud in some distant corner of his mind that his voice was steady.

Malfoy was so close now that they were practically touching. His smile was distinctly nasty, hinting at things Draco didn’t even want to think about. “I am very much accustomed to getting my own way. I would regret greatly placing you under Imperius or any similar charm – but if it was the only way to ensure that you remained faithful and obedient to me, I would do it without hesitation.”

Draco had given up trying to control his face and was focusing all his energy on standing up straight, on not cowering before this man, who frightened him far more than he wanted to admit, who was the monster of all his baby nightmares, and who was obviously willing to follow through on every threat he had made...

A hand wrapped around Malfoy's shoulder. He spun.

Just in time for his nose to meet with a small fist.

"How dare you," snapped Danger, interposing herself between father and son. "How dare you speak to my son that way."

"Your son?" sneered Malfoy, though the effect of the sneer was somewhat diminished by the necessity of his holding a fold of his cloak to his bleeding nose. "And who might you be?"

"What, you don't remember me?" Danger chuckled. The warm sound seemed to banish some of the darkness around them. "I find that hard to believe. But let me refresh your memory. I held Draco in my arms the night we came to claim him. I called him by his name and told you who he would become."

"You!" Malfoy's face cleared, became furious. "The Muggle! Lupin's woman!"

"Very good," said Danger approvingly. "Gold star for you."

"You will not take my son from me again!"

"So right – because there's nothing to take. You have no son, Lucius. Not legally. However, if Draco wishes to claim you as his father, that's his right, I won't stop him." Danger tilted her head back. "Do you?" she asked very quietly.

"Let me say it?" Draco whispered back. Danger nodded and stepped over to one side, to let Draco move forward and stand in front of her. His heart seemed to lurch as he looked again at the face so like his own, twisted in rage, and he wished desperately that the image he'd

seen in the mirror could have been real – but the truth had to be faced, and the difference between the two adults' behavior toward him had told him everything he needed to know.

"I thought I wanted to know you," said Draco finally. "But now I see I already do. All the stories I've been told are true. You don't care about me. You never did. All you want is someone to call your son and show off to the world. Someone who'll do whatever you want without you ever giving him anything back. Well, I'm not interested. I have a father already – I have two fathers, and two mothers – and they care about me. Me. A real person, Draco Black, with his own ideas and interests, not some made-up perfect son they want me to be."

Malfoy was breathing heavily, but Draco wasn't finished. "And I have friends, too. I'm friends with Ron and Ginny Weasley. And with Neville Longbottom, and Luna Lovegood. And I have my sisters – Meghan Black and Hermione Granger-Lupin – and my brother. You remember him. You wanted him to be my brother. Well, now he is. His name is Harry Potter, and he's my alpha, and I'd follow him anywhere, and I hope someday we will go into battle together, and beat you and everything you stand for. I hate you. And I never want to see you again."

Malfoy seemed unable to speak. He gesticulated for a moment, his mouth working madly, then charged at them –

Danger caught Draco's wrist and leapt from the cliff, pulling him off with her, but before Draco could scream, he realized they weren't falling, but rather drifting down lightly, as if they were feathers.

"What's happening? Why aren't we falling?"

"Draco, what's the last thing you remember before you were here?"

Draco thought. "Er, going to bed..." Then he felt stupid. "Oh. It's a dream. Isn't it?"

"Yes. But, unless I'm very much mistaken, that was the genuine Lucius Malfoy back there. You somehow managed to connect your

dream with his, so that the two of you were sharing. Not at all a common thing – I've only done it once or twice myself with someone who wasn't Remus. Do you have any idea how it happened?"

Draco ducked his head, embarrassed. "I wished on a star," he said quietly.

"Do you want to tell me why? I don't need to know, but I confess I'm a little curious."

Draco explained about the mirror they'd found, and what he'd seen, and what it had made him think of. It took the rest of their leisurely drift to the surface of the water.

"A magical mirror," Danger ruminated. "I think I know what you're talking about – but why don't we make sure?"

Abruptly, they were somewhere else.

"Hogwarts!"

"Exactly. This is where the mirror is in real life, so this is where it ought to be in dreams." Danger pushed the door open.

Harry leapt away from the mirror as if he'd been stung. "You scared me!"

"And you me," said Danger, hand on her heart. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to have a look in the mirror – and I think I figured out what the inscription on the top means. It's written backwards, in mirror language, it says 'I show not your face but your heart's desire'."

"Very good, Harry. Boys, I've read about this mirror – it's called the Mirror of Erised, and just like Harry said, it shows you the greatest desire of your heart. Now, desires are nothing to be ashamed of," Danger said gently to Draco, who felt himself turning a bit pink, "but we have to realize that they may not be possible in real life. You've each had a look, so I think now it's time to leave, and I want you both

to promise that you won't go looking for the Mirror again. It won't be here when you get back to school, and I have a feeling you won't be going where it's going to be."

Harry frowned. "But it didn't work for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I looked in it, but I didn't see anything. Just me."

Danger chuckled quietly. "Harry James Potter," she said affectionately, "you are a wonder."

"He is?"

"I am?"

"Yes. You are. Trust me."

The dream dissolved, and Draco was abruptly awake in the darkness of the den room, hearing Ron's snores from the bed on the other end and Harry's irregular breathing from the one next to him.

"All right?" whispered Harry.

"All right," Draco whispered back.

In the darkness, two hands met and clasped briefly. Danger stepped back into her own dream, where Remus was waiting for her, lolling on the beach in lion form, basking in the sun. "It's official," she said, plopping down beside him and scratching behind his ears.

What is?

"Harry Potter is the happiest person alive."

Well, that's good. A little lower, please.

“What do you think you’d see if you looked in the Mirror?” Danger mused.

You, scratching just a little to the left... a little more... that’s it. Ahhh.

A few moments later, there were no humans on the dream beach at all. Only a lion and a lioness.

In dreams, you can be anything you want.

(A/N: Like it? Hate it? Let me know – please review! Please... :looks at readers with puppy-dog eyes: It’s the end of the semester, my hated group projects are trying to eat me, only your review love keeps me going! And your Yahoo group love, which is of course splendiferous!)

Chapter 11: Secrets

Hermione awoke the next morning to the sounds of voices from the floor below.

She pulled on her dressing gown, wondering idly how on earth Ginny and Meghan were still asleep with all the racket. It sounded as if all four Pack-parents were talking at once, and none of them were listening to a word the others said.

“QUIET!” said Moony’s voice when Hermione was halfway down the stairs, and the babble ceased abruptly. She descended the rest of the way to see Letha and Danger sitting at a small table in the middle of the room that hadn’t been there yesterday (probably conjured, she thought), Letha holding a large notebook open on the table with her left hand and a quill in her other, while Padfoot leaned over her shoulder and Moony sat in one of the armchairs, from which he could see the stairs perfectly well.

“I was going to say we’d wake the cubs, but we already have, it seems,” continued Moony, nodding to Hermione where she stood on the landing.

“No, just me and the boys,” said Hermione.

“No, the boys are still asleep,” said Danger. “Good morning, by the way.”

“Good morning – how can they sleep when they’re right there?” Hermione pointed at the doorway to the den room, curtained off to give the boys some privacy. “You woke me, and I was upstairs.”

“We put a Silencing Charm on the curtains,” said Padfoot. “And if I’d thought, I’d have nipped upstairs and put one on your room too. Sorry about that.”

Hermione smiled, coming into the living room and sitting down on the floor by Moony’s chair. “It’s all right. We were going to be up soon anyway. What are you doing?”

“Party-planning,” said Letha, tapping the notebook with her quill. “Food, drinks, music, and things for you lot to do so you don’t blow up the Den because you’re bored.”

The curtains parted and Harry peered out, looking a bit dazed, his hair even more messy than usual. “Good morning,” he said, covering a yawn with his hand.

“You,” said Danger, pointing at him. “Kitchen. Fix. Now.”

“Kitchen?” Harry looked confused for a moment, then understanding dawned on his face. “Oh. Blender. Right.” He disappeared through the curtains again.

“Blender?” asked Hermione.

“Your brother relabeled all the buttons on my blender,” said Danger tartly. “With things like ‘Eject’ and ‘Destroy’. I dread the day when he’s learned enough to actually make it do those things. And don’t you two even think about it,” she snapped in Padfoot’s and Moony’s directions. The two men immediately looked highly innocent (Hermione craned her neck to see Moony’s face above her).

“You’d better hide the thing for tomorrow,” advised Letha. “With the guest list we’ve got here – did we ever get an answer on that from Dumbledore, Remus?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? He wrote back saying it would be fine – and Arthur and Molly owed him the letter before they left, so we’ve got all the necessary permissions. Who’s taking care of that?”

“Minerva said she’d do it,” said Padfoot. “Are all three coming, or just the two?”

“She’s going to ask them all, but I have a feeling...” Letha stopped. “Hermione, shoo.”

“Why?”

“Because this is supposed to be a surprise for our guests, and I know you six too well – none of you can keep a secret from any of the others. So it remains an adult secret until tomorrow around four. Understand?”

Hermione sighed and got to her feet. “I understand.”

I don’t like, but I understand.

More than even the average eleven-year-old, Hermione resented being kept out of things. Her mind was always hungry for knowledge, and the mere thought of someone else knowing something she didn’t annoyed her terribly. Her eventual goal in life was to know everything.

And I don’t care if it’s not supposed to be possible. Magic’s not supposed to be possible either, and yet here we are, witches and wizards.

These thoughts had carried her into the kitchen, where Harry, wand in hand, was just finishing with the blender. “I left one,” he said, beckoning her closer. “Can you find it?”

Hermione looked the buttons over. “That one,” she said, pointing.

“How’d you guess?”

“I don’t think most blenders have a setting like that.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, they should.”

The rest of the day was devoted to planning and preparing for the party, and (at least on the part of the cubs) trying to figure out the secret. The adults, though, were on the alert, and never slipped once.

It was very frustrating, Harry thought, to have prankster parents. They knew all the tricks, so you could never – well, almost never – pull anything over on them. On the plus side, they didn’t punish you nearly so hard if you pulled off whatever you had tried to do really well...

He remembered, late that afternoon, something Padfoot and Moony had shown them earlier in the holidays that they hadn't shown the girls yet.

"Want to see a cool trick?" he said, leaning on the doorway of the girls' room with Ron and Draco standing behind him.

Hermione looked up from her book. "Does it involve us getting wet, messy, or annoyed?"

"No."

Hermione looked at Ginny and Meghan, who nodded. "All right."

All six of them crowded into the upstairs bathroom, and the boys explained the Animagus scrying spell to the girls. Hermione went first.

"It's a cat," she said when she was finished. "But not grey, like Danger turned me into – it's got three colors, white and orange and black."

"Calico," said Ginny. "A calico cat. They're so pretty. Can I go next?"

Ron handed Ginny his wand, and she cast the spell. It seemed to take her a long time to see her form, and she looked puzzled when she broke away. "It's like a cat," she said. "But not. It's bigger, I think – and it's got reddish fur with dark spots – and its tail is very short and has a black tip, and it has a face almost like a wolf."

"I'll be right back," said Hermione, and dashed away.

Harry, Ron, and Draco rolled their eyes at each other.

Meghan borrowed Harry's wand to work the magic. "It's a deer!" she said happily as Hermione returned, panting a bit, with one of the encyclopedias from the living room in her hands. "A girl deer – a doe."

"Well, you're not going to be a stag, Pearl," teased Harry, going in for a knuckle rub. Meghan dodged, and Harry's hand ended up on

Ginny's head. He drew back hastily, and Ginny blushed and mumbled something that sounded like an apology.

"Ginny, is this your form?" asked Hermione, drawing everyone's attention. She held the book up, open to a certain page.

Ginny looked at the picture. "I think so – yes, that's it. It has the short tail and everything – what is it?"

"Eurasian lynx," Hermione recited. "A type of wildcat, usually about 3-4 feet long and 2-3 feet tall at the shoulder. Fur can range from yellowish brown to reddish grey with dark spots, and tail is short and stubby with a black tip." She handed the book to Ginny. "That's a really great form. You could fight really well with that."

Ginny looked at the picture. "I guess I could," she said, flexing the fingers of one hand as if wondering what it would feel like to have large, well-furred paws with sharp claws hidden away inside them.

"Harry's is good for fighting too," said Meghan. "Wolves are dangerous and fierce."

"Unless they're tamed," said Hermione with a significant look towards one of the bedrooms, making the cubs all snicker and the Weasleys look blank.

"Yours would be good for sneaking, Hermione," said Ron. "And Draco's too. Except for being white – you'd be too easy to see. Maybe you could roll in the dirt or something."

"Excuse me?" Draco looked highly offended. "I don't roll in the dirt for anything! Not even for sneaking around!"

"So you'd rather get killed?" offered Harry.

"Well, maybe if it was roll in the dirt or get killed. But not for anything else. And yours would be good for spying, Ron – hawks can see everything."

Discussion of their forms occupied most of the rest of the afternoon.

Excitement had everyone up early the next morning, and Letha and Danger kept them all moving after that. Even with everything they'd done the day before, and all their hands to help, there was still just barely time to finish getting ready before the Floo chimed for the first time.

Luna and Mr. Lovegood were the first arrivals, to no one's surprise. Draco whispered something to Luna, who looked speculative, then nodded, and the two of them hurried into the ground floor bathroom together and shut the door.

Mr. Lovegood looked a bit nonplussed. "Not that I have any objections to her choice," he said, "but aren't they a bit young for that sort of thing?"

Padfoot and Moony looked at each other. "You explain," they said at the same time, making everyone laugh.

By the time Padfoot had been forced to clarify what Draco and Luna were actually doing in the bathroom, they had reemerged, Luna looking very satisfied. "I'd be an owl if I were an Animagus," she announced. "A white owl like Hedwig. I'd like that. Owls can see well in the dark, and they can fly."

The Floo chimed again, this time signaling the arrival of Mrs. Longbottom and Neville. He was immediately pounced upon by all the other children, introduced to Luna and Ginny, and hauled away to the bathroom to scry for his form as well.

It was very crowded in the bathroom with all eight of them, but with the smaller ones sitting on the counter and the bigger ones pressed against the walls, they all squeezed in. Neville had to cast the spell three times before it worked, and even then it seemed to take a long time. He looked very confused when he turned away. "It was a monkey," he said. "But then it disappeared and reappeared again. I didn't know monkeys could do that."

"What color was it?" asked Hermione.

"Silver, with black eyes."

Hermione felt the pleasurable thrill of being able to answer someone's question. "A demiguise, Neville! Not a monkey, a demiguise! That's where Invisibility Cloaks come from – they're made out of demiguise fur! If you became an Animagus, you could turn invisible whenever you wanted!"

Neville looked surprised and pleased. "Cool!" Then his face fell. "I couldn't ever be an Animagus, though – it's too hard, it takes a really good wizard to do that, and I'm almost a Squib–"

Three people at once spoke up in protest of this statement, making so much noise that Hermione almost didn't hear the Floo go off again. "More guests!"

They all piled out of the bathroom. Ginny, in the lead, squealed with excitement when she saw one of the new arrivals. "Charlie!"

"Hey, there, Fireball," said the stocky red-haired young man, catching his excited little sister as she hurtled toward him. "How are you?"

"I'm all right – I thought you were still in Romania!"

"I got a few days off and came to spend it with Tonks and her folks, and they got invited to the party here, so I just had to come along, even though it meant I'd have to see you and Ronniekins..." Charlie pulled a long-suffering face, making all the adults laugh.

"Don't call me that," groaned Ron, but he hugged his brother anyway.

"And that's not all you'll be seeing," said Letha with a smile. Charlie and the cubs looked at her questioningly, and she shook her head, pointing at the Floo, which had just chimed once more.

Professor McGonagall was the first person to emerge this time, and closely following her –

"Fred! George!" Ginny greeted her twin brothers just as ecstatically as she had Charlie. "I didn't know you were coming!"

“You weren’t supposed to, Gin,” said one of the twins, hugging her back. “It was a surprise.”

“Some surprise,” grumbled Ron. “I get enough of them at school.” But he didn’t really look too unhappy to see the twins.

“Is Percy coming?” asked Charlie, holding both the twins in headlocks at the same time.

“No, he’s decided to remain at Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall, straightening her robes.

“Good,” said Ron under his breath. “Nothing breaks up a party faster than Percy.”

Hermione smacked him. “That’s not nice!”

“But it is true,” said Harry. “I think Percy’s allergic to fun.”

“No, he’s just addicted to being serious,” said one of the twins, who had gotten away from Charlie by now.

“Don’t even start,” said at least two people to Padfoot, who immediately tried to look like he hadn’t been about to say something.

Introductions were made – Healer Tonks told the cubs to call her Aunt Andy and her husband Uncle Ted, but Neville’s gran remained Mrs. Longbottom to everyone – and the party could begin in earnest. The adults walked about the house in small groups, chatting, and the children parked themselves in the living room with large amounts of food and drink. Charlie had some fascinating stories to tell about his work with the dragons, and Tonks’ anecdotes about Auror training had the boys riveted.

Professor Dumbledore arrived somewhat later with Hagrid, apologizing for being late, but he’d had to finish a few things at Hogwarts. He made up for his lateness, though, by working a few wonderful illusions, including a beautiful tree that seemed to sprout in the middle of the music room floor, grow to the peak of the cathedral

ceiling, sprout silver leaves and golden fruit, and then vanish in a shower of sparks.

No one was really interested in a sit-down meal, since the food constantly available more than made up for it, so it was around the usual time for dinner that Letha asked if anyone would be interested in dancing. Aunt Andy and Uncle Ted volunteered, along with Moony and Danger, and Professor Dumbledore offered to charm the piano so that it would play by itself and leave Letha free to dance with Padfoot. She accepted with thanks, and with a tap of Dumbledore's wand, the piano began to play the music for one of the set-dances Padfoot had taught the cubs.

Charlie put his drink down and grabbed Tonks' wrist. "No, no, you don't want to dance with me," she protested, laughing. "I'll step on your feet!"

"They're yours to step on."

"How d'you figure that?"

"I'm yours, so everything that's mine is yours, including my feet. So step away, Tonksie."

They took their place in the dance, Tonks blushing a bit.

Four was the usual number of couples for a set in this sort of dance, Hermione recalled. It wasn't very complicated – a certain number of steps this way and that, bow or curtsy to your partner, turn and bow or curtsy to a different partner, swing around a few different ways – it was very pretty to watch, though, with everyone in their colorful dress robes...

"May I have this dance?" a voice asked her. She looked up, startled.

Harry stood in front of her, offering her his hand.

"We'd break up the set," she objected. "They already have enough."

"We're making our own. There's enough room in here for two."

“Do we have enough?”

“We will if you’ll come along. Please?”

Hermione looked past Harry to see Ron leading Ginny into place on the dance floor. “Well... all right. But just this one.”

The music began a new section just as she and Harry reached their places. She curtseyed to him, seeing Ginny, Luna, and Meghan doing the same down the line, and he bowed back, as did Ron, Draco, and Neville, who looked a bit worried.

Meghan’ll take care of him, Hermione thought, and then concentrated on the measures of the dance. It really wasn’t hard at all – advance, retreat, curtsey to Harry, move diagonal and curtsey again – Ron bowed in reply, they came together and moved apart – she was moving down the line, now she was dancing opposite Draco, who made his bow very gallant, almost flamboyant. She flicked his ear with her fingers as she passed.

Neville was her partner now, and he looked distinctly unhappy. “What’s wrong?” she asked as the dance brought them together.

“I stepped on Meghan’s feet,” he whispered back the next time he was close enough. “And I keep messing up the steps.”

“It’s all right,” Hermione assured him a moment later. “Just keep going, you’re doing fine – ah!” For Neville had just stepped on her foot as well.

“Sorry, sorry—” Neville looked very apologetic.

“I’m fine, you didn’t get me hard,” fibbed Hermione. In fact, her foot hurt quite a bit, but she was determined to finish the dance and not make Neville feel bad.

She made her way back down the line, passing Draco, who gave her a very carefully correct bow this time, Ron, who unaccountably

blushed a little when he saw her, and making it back to Harry just in time for the final measures of the music.

The observers applauded all the dancers, who sat down breathing a little harder but smiling.

“Thirteen,” said Charlie ruefully, rubbing his left foot. “I think that’s a new record.”

“Which way, high or low?” asked Padfoot.

Tonks threw an ice cube at him.

The evening progressed pleasantly, with more dancing (just adults this time), more stories and talking, and a juggling exhibition by Hagrid, who started with small things like cups and worked his way up to his grand finale – juggling (with their and their parents’ and siblings’ permission) Harry, Draco, and Ron. Neville and the girls had all declared their intention of keeping their feet firmly on the ground.

“How was it?” asked Hermione when the boys were deposited back on the floor by a red-faced but exuberant-looking Hagrid.

“Exciting,” said Draco, weaving a bit on his feet. “I think I need to sit down.”

“I think I need the loo,” groaned Ron, prompting the twins to help him to the bathroom.

“I think I want to do it again,” said Harry, making all the adults laugh and Hagrid ruffle his hair and tell him one was his limit for the day.

“But come around some time durin’ school, maybe I c’n accommodate yeh then,” he said with a wink.

The party was winding down when Hermione noticed Professor Dumbledore subtly signaling the Pack-parents about something. Curious, she slipped out of the room after them, being sure to stay as much out of sight as she could.

“...before the holidays end,” Professor Dumbledore was saying as she got within earshot. “He needs a fresh supply.”

“You’re certain this is the genuine Flamel you talked to?” asked Padfoot. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t doubt you,” he added quickly, “but with who you suspect might be after this thing—”

“No offense taken, Sirius, your concern is apt, and duly noted. I have, indeed, made certain of his identity, and will make certain again when he arrives.”

“So what do you need us for?” asked Letha.

“For one thing, I will need one or two of you to help Nicolas pass the obstacle you set up – for another, I would like some extra security around the entrance while he is within.”

“You can have any three of us,” said Moony, “or all four if you can have someone keep an eye on the cubs while we’re there.”

“That can be arranged. I cannot express my gratitude at having friends such as you to help safeguard such a valuable item...”

Hermione held her breath as footsteps passed her by, grateful for her hiding place behind the coat tree. With so many people at the house, the thing was loaded down to the point where no one would notice her behind it unless they looked directly at her feet.

She counted a slow twenty after the footsteps had faded, then slid out and hurried upstairs.

She had some research to do.

“Meet me in the den room in five minutes,” whispered Hermione to Harry when she returned to the music room.

Harry nodded and watched Hermione slip off to talk to Ron. I wonder what’s up?

Five minutes later, he casually made his way through the kitchen, noticing Fred and George bending over something at the sink, and slipped through the curtains screening off the den room, hearing the noise of the party drop to almost nothing once he was inside.

Most of the others were already there – Ron and Draco were sitting on their beds, Ron with Ginny beside him, Draco with Luna and Meghan. Hermione was pacing up and down at the foot of the beds, looking very excited. A large book lay on Harry's bed.

Neville came through the curtains from the living room a moment later and sat down on Draco's closed trunk. "Good, that's everyone," said Hermione. "You'll never believe what I found out–"

"Well, not unless you tell us, we won't," said Ron.

Hermione ignored this. "I found out what that dog is guarding."

"The three-headed one?" asked Ginny.

"Yes. It's something very precious – it's called a Sorcerer's Stone."

"That makes the Elixir of Life," said Luna. "It makes you immortal if you drink it."

Hermione nodded, looking a touch put-out that Luna had stolen some of her thunder. "And it also turns any metal into pure gold. It's the only one in existence – and it's at Hogwarts."

The young Pack looked at each other. Neville finally voiced the question that seemed to be on everyone's mind.

"Why?"

"To keep it safe, probably," said Draco, saving Harry from having to answer. "Hogwarts is one of the safest places in the wizarding world."

"And even safer with that dog guarding it," said Ron. He had listened several times to Draco's description of the dog, and the detail of its having three heads seemed to have made a deep impression on him.

“And there are other things guarding it as well,” said Harry, figuring that since they already knew, it wouldn’t hurt to tell them a bit more. “Spells and enchantments. I know the Pack did one.”

“How do you know?” asked Hermione.

Harry winced. Should have seen that coming. “I... guessed.”

“Liar.”

“Fine, Moony told me – but he also told me not to tell anyone, so don’t go noising it around, all right?”

Ron snorted. “Like this isn’t noising it around.” He gestured at the eight people in the room. “We might as well just tell the entire world. Ginny can’t keep her mouth shut about anything.”

“Hey!” Ginny elbowed her brother.

Something struck Harry. “Wait a minute,” he said. “We swore the Pack-oath. Last Christmas, when everything was happening, the seven of us swore.” He looked around at Neville. “And then you swore with us when we got to school, and you’ve been denning with us since October. So technically, we’re all Pack here.”

“So what?” asked Meghan.

“So I declare this a den-secret. On your oath, you don’t tell it to anyone who isn’t Pack. I think we can all do that.”

Slowly, heads nodded all around the room.

“So,” said Hermione, sitting down. “Now we know what it is that’s down there. And we know that at least two professors were messing around with that door. Snape and Quirrell.”

“Right.” Draco leaned back on his bed. “So, on Halloween, was Quirrell trying to get to the Stone and got stopped by the dog, or was Snape trying to get to it and got stopped by having to save Quirrell?”

Several people traded glances. Before anyone could say anything, though, an explosion was dimly audible through the Silencer on the curtains.

"That sounds interesting," said Harry, getting up quickly and pulling the curtains open.

Fred and George, both a bit scorched, were attempting to appear innocent in front of a rather irate-looking Danger. Small bits of plastic and metal littered the kitchen, which had a smell of smoke about it.

Harry gulped and closed the curtains again quickly.

They were yanked back open almost immediately.

"You will now tell me why there was still a button marked 'Explode' on my blender," said Danger sharply, snagging one of Harry's wrists and pulling him into the kitchen.

"Thanks a lot," Harry muttered to Fred and George out of the corner of his mouth.

School started again in due course. The teachers began loading on homework, and Harry worked harder than anyone as Quidditch practice resumed, but he enjoyed it. Wood seemed to have gotten over his irrational fear that Harry would break, and was now working him just as hard as any other member of the team. This meant that Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room three nights a week wet, cold, tired, and exhilarated.

Lockhart was as good as his word, introducing them to his book *Wanderings with Werewolves* in the first class of term. Harry and Draco managed to keep their snickers to themselves in the first half of the class, but then Lockhart began enumerating ways that one could tell a werewolf in human form from another person. Among the first signs on his list were "moodiness", "bad temper", "perfectionism", and "favoritism".

Ron slipped Harry a note. He opened it.

Snape's a werewolf!

Harry dropped his quill, slid under his desk to get it, and stuffed the sleeve of his robe in his mouth so he could laugh without being overheard.

"Next week – my classic defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf!" announced Lockhart as the bell rang.

"How do you defeat a werewolf?" asked Neville as they made their way out of class.

"Easy," said Ron. "Cut its paws off."

The rest of the group groaned.

Harry's second Quidditch match of the year was approaching. This one would be against Hufflepuff, and it was important because if Gryffindor won, they would be in first place for the House Cup. Of course, it was also important simply because it was a Quidditch match, but the house points aspect meant that even Hermione was interested, so Harry didn't push it.

He and Draco were also having fun in Defense Against the Dark Arts. They would wait until Lockhart was in full swing, then stick their hands up and ask some innocent little question.

Like: "Professor Lockhart, is it true werewolves can't have children?"

Or: "Professor Lockhart, is it true werewolves in human form aren't contagious unless they bite someone on purpose?"

Then they got to watch Lockhart try to come up with an answer, and catch him every time he made a mistake.

Hermione didn't speak to them for hours after each DADA class, but Ron and Neville, along with most of the rest of the male portion of their year, thought it was tremendously amusing and encouraged them to keep it up.

At the class directly before the Quidditch match, Harry felt daring. He stuck his hand up, and Lockhart, who never seemed to learn, called on him.

“Professor, is there any such thing as a werewolf tamer?”

“A werewolf tamer, Mr. Potter? I’m afraid I don’t quite understand. Could you explain what you mean for the class?”

“Someone whose magic makes a werewolf not dangerous. She – or he,” Harry added hastily, “can touch a werewolf to bring his human mind back. Or if she stays with the werewolf while the moon rises, then the werewolf never loses his mind at all. And their minds are connected so the werewolf can talk to her.”

He became aware that the entire classroom was staring at him, Draco and Hermione with expressions of horror.

“Is there?” he finished, rather lamely.

Lockhart too was staring at him. Then he burst into peals of laughter. “Harry, Harry, Harry – what an imagination! No, I’m afraid there’s no such thing as a werewolf tamer – not in the way you seem to be saying. Someone who can tame a werewolf by touch... why, if anyone did have that sort of magic, Healers all over the world would be clamoring to examine her! She could be even more famous than I am – though not for the same variety of things, I’ve no doubt!”

Hermione’s face was set in lines of extreme annoyance. Draco’s quill was scratching steadily across a scrap of parchment.

“No, no, I’m afraid that’s just your imagination working there, Mr. Potter.” Lockhart wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. “But if you’ll turn to page 134, you’ll find a comprehensive list of my personally guaranteed spells and talismans to keep werewolves away from your person if you have to be out and about during the full moon...”

Ron handed Harry the note Draco had been writing. Slowly, he opened it.

It consisted of a single word, written in very heavy lines.

Nice.

Neither Hermione nor Draco would speak to him for the rest of the day.

“What did you do?” asked Ron in bewilderment at dinner, when Draco and Hermione had pointedly moved several places down the table when Harry had tried to sit next to them. “Was it that question in Defense?”

Harry nodded, poking at his food.

“What was so bad about that? I thought it was a good question. It’s really funny when you and Draco do that to him, you know?” Ron took a bite of mashed potato, then frowned around it. “Ow oo’oo oh’oh uh uh-ow eh-uhlz, eh-ee-ay?”

“What?” asked Harry in total confusion.

Ron swallowed. “I said, how do you know so much about werewolves, anyway? Lockhart looks like a piker next to you. Have you been stealing some of Hermione’s books or something?”

“Moony’s interested in Dark creatures,” said Harry quickly. “I read a book of his about werewolves once.”

“Once? It sounds like you memorized it.”

“All right, twice. It was interesting.” Harry hoped he didn’t sound too defensive. “It had a section of personal stories by werewolves. All about the problems they have getting work and things like that. Until about twenty years ago, they weren’t even allowed to go to school at Hogwarts.”

Ron sat up straighter. “You mean they are now?”

“I think so.”

“Wow.” Ron looked around the room with new eyes. “I wonder if any do right now...”

“Wait for the full moon and see if anyone disappears for a couple days,” Harry advised, grinning.

“Think I will. Wow. A werewolf...” Ron seemed torn between awe and fear.

“What would you do if you found out someone you know is one?” asked Harry curiously.

Ron’s head snapped back to him. “Harry – mate – please don’t tell me...”

“What? Oh – no! No, not me, I’m not one...” Harry laughed. “You should know I’m not. We den together, remember?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Haven’t you ever noticed when we den?”

“About once a month...” Comprehension came into Ron’s face. “It is on full moons, isn’t it? I never noticed that before. How come then?”

Harry shrugged. “Just tradition, I guess. That’s when we den at home.”

“Ron,” said Hermione from behind the boys, getting their attention. “Would you please tell Harry that we’ll be waiting for him in the common room.” She turned and marched away, meeting Draco at the door of the Great Hall.

Ron watched her go. “She is really ticked at you, mate,” he said.

“I know.” Harry got up. “I should go. See you in the common room?”

“All right. See you there.”

Harry made his way out of the Great Hall without noticing the thoughtful expression on Ron's face.

Draco and Hermione were sitting together, not talking, not doing anything, when Harry climbed through the portrait hole. At once, they got up and moved to either side of him, like some kind of guards. "In our dorm," said Draco under his breath.

"Knock it off," muttered Harry, trying to push them away. They moved slightly farther from him, but still stayed one in front of him and one behind as they climbed the stairs.

"What?" Harry demanded as soon as they were sure they were alone in the dormitory. "What is this about?"

"You know what this is about," snapped Hermione. "You with your talk about den-secrets – and you're going and telling the whole world about one of ours!"

"I didn't tell anyone anything!"

"No, you just asked a question that anyone with half a brain could see was taken straight from something you know about!" Draco was glaring at him.

Harry glared straight back. "You haven't exactly been holding back in class!"

"Yeah, well, I didn't ask an extremely detailed question about something that shouldn't even exist!"

"Harry," said Hermione, getting both boys' attention. "I'm writing home about this."

Harry felt his stomach sink. "Hermione – don't. Please, don't."

"You as good as told a den-secret, Harry. I have to."

"No." Harry looked hard at her. "Don't do it. That's an order."

Hermione looked down her nose at him. "You can't order me to do anything, Harry Potter."

"Yes I bloody well can – I'm your alpha!"

"You broke Pack law, Harry. Or almost broke it. You forfeited your authority. It goes to me now. I lead until you've proved to us that you're not going to be an idiot any more."

Harry saw red. He started across the room, clenching his fists –

Draco stepped in his way. "Don't try it," he warned. "She's right and you know it. And if you even think about hurting her, I'll break your arm."

"Not if I break yours first," Harry growled, and grabbed for Draco.

Draco sidestepped neatly. Harry's grab missed, and he lost his balance, flailing his arms – he might not have fallen, though, if Draco hadn't assisted him to the floor, and he would certainly have been able to get up if Draco hadn't sat down on him, grabbed his arm, and twisted it up behind his back.

He struggled to get free, but Draco twisted his arm a little more every time he did, and eventually, he stopped, hearing his blood thunder in his ears, feeling the weight of his brother pinning him down...

His brother. He'd attacked his brother. And been trying to attack his sister. For no other reason than that they were telling him something he didn't want to hear.

And the worst of it was, they were right.

He'd endangered the Pack by being a stupid git. He didn't deserve to be alpha.

Shame flooded him. He could feel his face turning bright red.

Of course, that might be because there was someone sitting on his back...

“Can I let you up yet?” asked Draco quietly.

Harry swallowed against the lump in his throat. “Yeah.”

Draco let his arm go, then got off him, and Harry rolled over and sat up. He didn’t dare look directly at Draco yet, he thought he might cry if he did. “I’m sorry,” he said very quietly to the bedpost.

“It’s all right. You were mad. And I could tell you knew we were right. You didn’t even really try to fight back. Padfoot taught us the counter to the arm-twist last year, remember?”

Harry nodded. He did remember, now that he thought about it. But he hadn’t been thinking a few minutes ago. He’d just been mad.

“Never fight when you’re angry.” Moony’s voice came to his mind, and he tried to push it away, but it wouldn’t be pushed. “Angry people make mistakes, they forget important things. Try to stay as calm as you can if you get into a fight.”

Harry stared at the floor.

I messed this up about ten ways from Tuesday. I really don’t deserve to be alpha anymore.

“Harry?”

It was Hermione’s voice. He looked up. She was sitting on Draco’s bed, legs crossed, wand in her lap. “Yeah?”

“I’m not going to write home.”

Harry felt relieved – but also, strangely, guilty. “Why not?”

“There’s no reason for me to. The Pack’s coming themselves on Saturday. You should tell them yourself.”

Harry winced, but he knew she was right. "All right. I'll do that." He stood up and crossed the room. "Hermione – I'm sorry. That was really wrong of me. You're right – you should be alpha now."

He went down to one knee in front of her and tipped his head back, closing his eyes.

"Only until after Saturday," Hermione said. "After whatever happens with the Pack-parents, you're our alpha again. But until then..."

Her hand closed gently around Harry's throat, symbolizing her power over him. Even though he knew it was only temporary, Harry couldn't help but shiver.

I won't do this again, he vowed. I'll never do something this stupid again, so I'll never have to stop being alpha again.

(A/N: Yes, I've finally updated – with lots of stuff you folks have been asking for! More Charlie/Tonks, more plot, a bit of action, and more Quidditch in the offing – and next chapter won't take nearly as long, because I don't intend to write a full-fledged AU story between now and then! So, until next time, ta-ta – and today's random review topic is... pencil sharpeners.)

Chapter 12: Days Like This

“Mr. Potter.”

Harry’s head snapped up. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you have anything you wish to ask before we start our lesson today? Any important questions on your mind?”

Draco watched as Harry’s jaw muscles tightened. “No, sir.”

“Are you certain? I would hate to stand in the way of such a young genius as yourself.”

It was a good thing Harry had both hands clenched around a fold of his robes, Draco thought, because otherwise his fingernails would have been cutting into his palms. “Yes, sir, I’m sure.”

“Very well.” Snape turned away from them and tapped the blackboard with his wand, filling it with writing. “Let us begin, then, if Mr. Potter has no pearls of wisdom to grace us with.”

The class took notes diligently for a few minutes. Then Neville spilled his ink all over himself and Colleen Lamb, who was sitting with him today. While Snape was dealing with the spill, Harry scribbled a note and handed it to Draco.

How the bloody hell did he know about that?

Draco wrote an answer underneath.

Teachers gossip worse than girls.

Harry looked furious all over again.

Does that mean the whole school knows?

Draco didn’t want to write it, but he wasn’t going to lie.

Probably.

Harry read the answer, nodded grimly, then started twisting the note into a little screw. Seeing the look on his brother's face, Draco figured he should be grateful it wasn't Snape's neck Harry was going for.

But as much as he hates it, he's only got himself to blame for this one.

I think that's what he hates about it.

"Can I borrow your notes, Hermione?" asked Neville in the common room that afternoon. "Snape Vanished mine when he cleaned up the ink."

"Sure." Hermione handed them over.

Draco looked up from his own Potions notes and noticed Ron sitting by himself, a little ways away from the other three (Harry was at Quidditch practice), scribbling things on a piece of parchment and mumbling to himself.

Sounds like he's studying for Astronomy.

"We should write this day down," he said, coming up behind Ron. "Ron Weasley studying without Hermione having to make him."

Ron jumped and rolled his parchment up quickly. "Don't scare me like that! You walk too quiet, Drake, you know that?"

"Sorry. It's a habit."

"From what?"

"From when Meghan used to take naps. We'd all have to be quiet and not wake her up."

"Not from playing pranks?"

Draco grinned. "Well, yeah, that too."

The Fat Lady's portrait opened. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, muddy and disheveled, trooped in, Harry bringing up the rear. Draco

caught his eye and gave him a questioning look. Harry shrugged, and his hands moved.

“Leave me alone for a while.”

All right.

He nodded in understanding. Harry signed a thank you and started up the stairs to the dorm.

Ron watched him go. “Is he still mad about Potions?” he asked.

“I guess. He wants us to leave him alone.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me.”

Ron frowned. “How? You didn’t say anything, neither did he. He just...” He mimicked Harry’s motions.

“It’s a kind of sign language. Padfoot and Moony invented it when they were at school, and they taught some of it to us.”

Ron shook his head. “That is so unfair,” he said enviously. “That is just so unfair. You have the coolest family in the world.”

“Want to learn some?”

Ron nodded eagerly.

“All right.” Draco sat down on the table in front of Ron’s armchair. “Start with the basics. Insults. These are fun because you can say something nasty about someone right to their face, and they’ll never know. Like this.” Draco scratched his left temple. “I think Goyle’s a really nice guy.”

“You do?”

“No. It doesn’t matter what I say. Except for the name, what you say doesn’t matter. What matters is the movement. You saw me do it, right?”

“You scratched right here.” Ron duplicated the movement.

“Right – and that means ‘Whoever I’m talking about is the world’s biggest idiot, how do they even figure out which feet their shoes go on in the morning?’ All that matters in what I say out loud is the name.”

Ron grinned. “I like this.”

“Thought you would. Now, if you scratch over here, that’s the same as saying ‘This person stinks so bad I want to ask them if they’ve ever heard of showers’...”

The Pack arrived early for this Quidditch match, as they had done for the one before it. This time, though, there was a difference. A fully-dressed, wide-awake Harry was curled up on one of the couches, obviously waiting for them.

“What are you doing up this early?” asked Sirius, moving forward to hug Harry even as he asked.

Harry looked awfully unhappy for a boy about to play his second Quidditch match ever, Danger thought. “I need to talk to you,” he said quietly. “To all of you. In private.”

“Is something wrong?” asked Remus concernedly.

“Not really... yeah, kind of... I don’t know.”

The Pack-parents traded looks.

Not really, yeah kind of, I don’t know? Sounds like a yes to me.

Let him tell us himself, on his own time. “We can be private here,” said Remus, leading the way to a sequestered clump of chairs. “Meghan, why don’t you go and see if Draco or Hermione are awake yet. Don’t wake anyone else.”

Meghan nodded and started climbing the boys' staircase.

"Ten gets you one she wakes Neville," murmured Aletha to Danger.

Danger chuckled. "I won't take it."

"Why not?"

"I never bet against a sure thing."

The women shared a private smile, then took their seats. Remus cast a Privacy Spell around their little group and nodded to Harry.

Harry looked rather as if he were going to be ill. "I did something really stupid in Defense on Thursday," he said miserably. "I thought it was funny, but it wasn't. It was just dumb."

He explained, and as he did, Danger was beset by quite a number of conflicting emotions. Annoyance, she finally decided, was predominant, but her wish to comfort Harry was close behind – it had, after all, been a very easy mistake to make, and he was only eleven...

"And now Hermione's alpha because she and Draco don't trust me anymore, and nobody should trust me because I'm a stupid idiot who can't keep secrets," Harry finished, staring hard at his hands, which were twisting his Quidditch robes in his lap.

"Enough," said Aletha firmly. "Calling yourself names doesn't help anything. Consider that part of your punishment if you like. No more name-calling."

"Okay," said Harry quietly, his eyes still downcast.

"I think we need to talk about this," said Remus. "Harry, would you excuse us for a moment?"

Harry nodded, got up, and walked quickly out of the area covered by the Privacy Spell.

The Pack-parents looked at each other.

“Well,” said Aletha finally.

“We may have done too good of a job,” said Sirius. “He’s starting to act like James.”

“And the things James did were funny when we were eleven, but from the ripe old age of thirty-two...” Remus shook his head. “There is reason for hope, though. He’s ashamed of himself. James was never ashamed of anything except getting caught.”

“I... don’t really know what to think,” confessed Danger. “I can sort of see both sides. I mean, he was wrong to tell that in class that way, but everyone’s going to think he made it up, so I doubt there’s any permanent harm done – and he seems to be taking it very hard.”

“I think what hit him hardest was giving up being alpha,” said Aletha. “Not necessarily for the power involved, but as he said himself, for the trust.” She sighed. “Harry’s just discovered one of the nasty truths of life. That everyone, even him, has parts of themselves they’d rather not see, and that sometimes those parts break loose – and when they do, the consequences can be bad, and lasting.”

Remus and Sirius both started to say something at the same time.

“Go ahead.”

“No, you.”

“All right – what you just said, Letha, about parts of yourself you’d rather not see – made me think of probably the stupidest thing I ever did.”

“How can you choose?” Remus inquired blandly.

Sirius directed a pointed look at him. “That thing with Snape following you in seventh year?”

Remus inclined his head, acknowledging the point. Role reversal, anyone? he sent ruefully to Danger. I'm playing around, and Sirius is pulling me back on topic...

Danger allowed him to see her mental amusement. Unusual, but fun to watch.

Still, it does give me an idea.

Harry stood outside the Privacy Spell, shuffling his feet against the carpet. The sick feeling he'd had since he'd woken up that morning was partly gone, but not entirely. The first part was over – he'd told them. Now all he had to do was wait to find out what his punishment was going to be.

Right. That's all.

I'd rather sit through an extra Potions class.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Neville was coming down the boys' stairs, fully dressed and wearing his outdoor cloak, Meghan right behind him.

"Morning," said Harry.

"Good morning," said Neville, whom Harry had seldom seen smiling like this. "We're going out to the greenhouses before breakfast – Meghan wants to see some of the plants we've been working with in Herbology."

"Will you tell Mama Letha?" asked Meghan. Harry nodded, and she darted over to him and hugged him. "Thank you, thank you! I love you!"

Harry hugged her back, feeling his heart lighten a little more.

Not everyone hates me.

The Privacy Spell dissipated just as the portrait closed behind Neville. "Come here, Harry," said Padfoot.

Feeling a little bit like he was walking the plank, Harry came and stood in the indicated spot.

“First things first,” said Letha, standing up. She walked up to Harry and looked him in the eye, putting her hands on his shoulders. “You are still our cub, and we still love you. What you did was unwise and thoughtless, but we’re not about to stop loving you because of it.”

Harry tried not to show how much better this made him feel. A small part of him had been insisting that he’d forever disqualified himself as a member of the Pack at all, never mind an alpha.

“Your punishment is that you have to listen to a story.”

Harry blinked, sure he hadn’t heard that right. A story?

“Don’t get too excited,” advised Moony. “I don’t think you’ll like this much.”

“But you have to listen,” finished Danger. “And pay attention, and really think about what happened. Once you’ve done that, this is over with. Understand?”

Harry nodded.

“All right,” said Padfoot, sitting up in his chair. “This is a story from our time at Hogwarts, but it’s not one you’ve heard before. It has to do with me, and with your father, and with Snape, and peripherally with Moony.”

Harry sat down cross-legged on the floor facing his godfather and prepared to listen.

By the time the story was over, Harry wasn’t sure if he felt better or worse. Now he knew he wasn’t the only one who’d ever said something horribly stupid. But he hated to think of Padfoot doing something like that, something that could have ended up with someone dying – even if that someone was Snape.

Why did they tell me this now?

“I’ve seen that look on your face before,” said Moony, surveying Harry from the side. “It means, ‘So what?’”

Harry nodded, a little chagrined that his family could still read him so easily.

“In the first place, Harry, you’re not the only person in the world who’s said something they wish they could take back, because they thought it was clever at the time.”

“Figured that one out myself,” muttered Harry.

“Good. So can you figure out the other reason?”

Moony’s politely chiding tone needled Harry, but he kept his wince internal.

I deserve this. I probably deserve more, actually, the Pack always lets us off light.

“No,” he said finally.

Danger got up from the couch and came to kneel in front of him. “Life goes on, Greeneyes,” she said, her eyes catching and holding his. “Nothing we say or do can stop it. Not our best times, and not our worst. You made a mistake – but life has to go on. So you’ll learn from it, and not do something like this again, right?”

Harry nodded fervently.

“Good. Then I think we’re set.” Danger shifted over into sitting on her hip.

Harry looked around at his Pack-parents, disbelieving. “That’s it? I don’t have to miss the match?” That had been his worst fear – that the Pack would order him not to play today to make up for his blunder.

“Good Lord, no!” Moony actually looked alarmed. “Are you feeling all right? Able to play?”

“Yes – but what about punishment? Don’t I have to lose something I like?”

“Seems to me you’ve already lost quite a lot,” said Letha. “The trust of your siblings. Trust in yourself. You tell me – the last two days haven’t been much fun, have they?”

Harry shook his head. “Awful.”

“So there you are – you’ve punished yourself already. Us adding to that would just be mean.” Letha sat back in her chair. “Besides, there’s no reason for us to punish all of Gryffindor by making you forfeit the match.”

Harry smiled, feeling the last of the weight lift off him.

It’s over. It’s all over.

And I’ll never do anything that stupid again.

He recalled something. “Letha, Meghan went down to the greenhouses with Neville. They said they’d be back for breakfast.”

“Oh – well, I suppose that’s all right. How much trouble can they get into in a greenhouse?”

“Ask me that again in five years,” said Padfoot under his breath.

Draco came running down the boys’ stairs and drew quite a bit of adult attention. Danger was about to get up to say hello to him when Harry caught her arm. He had just remembered something else.

“Something wrong, Harry?”

“No – just a message I was supposed to give you. A while ago.”

Danger folded her arms, trying to look stern and mostly succeeding. “Message from whom?”

“He’s a bloke in a portrait who says his name is Al. He said to tell you Alex says hi.”

“What does this ‘bloke in a portrait’ look like?”

“A little like me grown up... like my dad, I guess, except he’s got green eyes. His hair isn’t messy, though. And he looks really confident, like he can do anything.”

Danger gave a slow smile. “And where exactly is this portrait of... Al?”

“Er... around.”

“Around. I see. Well, if you should happen to be... around at any point in the near future, you may tell Al that I say hi back.”

“All right.” Harry regarded his Pack-mother. “Do you know who he is?”

“I might. Why?”

“Because... I just want to know. He’s a Parselmouth, and I thought it might be nice to find out who other Parselmouths in history have been. Just so I can find out if they were really all Dark or not.”

Danger nodded. “A praiseworthy idea. Have you tried asking him who he is?”

“I tried. All he’d say was that he was just an ordinary bloke, but that his family split up in a war – over pureblood stuff.”

The dream he’d had that night suddenly rushed back on Harry, and he shivered, remembering the anger in Padfoot’s face and voice.

Tell the truth, Harry, that’s what you were expecting for this little stunt.

And that’s probably what you deserved.

You’re luckier than you know to have a Pack like this.

He realized he was missing what Danger was saying and tuned back in.

“... not to worry about it, okay?”

“Kay,” said Harry, hoping he wasn’t agreeing to anything too crazy.

Danger kissed him on the forehead, then got up to go say hello to Draco and Hermione, who had joined the party at some point while he and Danger were talking.

Harry remained where he was, absorbing the comfortable feeling of being at peace with himself again.

I was stupid. I know I was stupid. But nothing terrible happened, and it’s over now, and I won’t do it again.

“Harry.”

He looked up. Hermione was standing in front of him, holding her hand down. He accepted it and got to his feet.

Almost to his surprise, she dropped to one knee in front of him. “It’s yours again,” she said quietly, and tilted her head back.

“No,” Harry said, somehow knowing what he was about to say was right. “That’s for punishments and stuff. It should be the other way.”

Hermione looked at him in confusion, then understanding flared in her eyes. She bowed her head, and Harry rested his hand on the back of her neck, watching her shoulders rise and fall with one breath, then taking it away.

“Neenie,” he whispered to her.

She lifted her head and bared her teeth at him for an instant. “There’s no one else here, so I’ll let you get away with it. This time.”

She stood up, and Draco took her place. Harry placed his hand on his brother's head, glorying in the feeling of renewed trust among the siblings.

I am never giving this up, he promised himself as he helped Draco up.

But something was still missing.

Harry looked over at the Pack-parents, who were watching their cubs quietly, and it hit him like a Bludger to the head. He was alpha of the cubs' Pack – but he had his own alpha as well –

He went to Moony and knelt in front of him, bowing his head.

A flicker of movement to one side caught his eye, and he turned his head slightly to see Hermione kneeling beside him and slightly behind. Turning his head the other way, he wasn't surprised to see Draco on his other side.

He knew this wouldn't make sense to almost anyone else he knew – even Ron, usually so ready to accept things, would have trouble with this. It looked medieval, even primitive, but Harry knew it was right.

He waited.

Remus was rather glad Harry couldn't see his face at the moment – he was, and knew he looked, totally nonplussed.

I assume they're expecting me to do what Harry did?

I would assume. Danger sounded just as unsure. Even for our cubs, this is odd.

All right. Going with the flow...

Remus started to put his hand on Harry's head, but something stopped him. A sense that it wasn't his time yet, that something else had to happen first.

He turned to Aletha and motioned her closer, gesturing to the cubs.

As if she had never had a doubt what to do, Aletha placed a hand gently on the back of Harry's head, then stepped to one side to do the same to Hermione, then to the other for Draco. When she had finished, Sirius came forward without being asked to take his turn. Danger went next, and Remus was last. When he had finished, he returned to Harry, bent down slightly, and placed a hand under the boy's elbow, bringing him to standing.

He looked into his Pack-son's face. A light shone in the green eyes behind the glasses that hadn't been there when the adults had arrived. Harry was himself again, confident smile and all, and Remus had never been happier to see a transformation, not even one of his own.

He pulled Harry into a tight hug. "The Hufflepuffs won't know what hit them," he murmured into the black hair.

"They won't have a chance," answered Harry into Remus' robes. He pulled away to grin up at Remus. "I'm going for the school speed record for capture of the Snitch. Five minutes fifteen seconds, set in 1824 by Charles Niblock. Ravenclaw."

"Well, we can't have that. Ravenclaw holding a record. Oy, Sirius – two Galleons says Harry breaks the speed record by thirty seconds."

"What's this? Speed record?"

Life was back to normal. The entire surreal scene with the children kneeling before their parents, like something from a storybook, might never have happened, Remus thought.

Except that it had, and he suspected it would again. The Pack loved traditions, and never missed an opportunity to create a new one.

Only I hope someone doesn't have to misbehave this drastically for it to happen again...

He dismissed it from his mind and joined in the conversation. Neville and Meghan turned up at breakfast rather damp (it was drizzling out) but very happy-looking. The Metallic Marigolds had

needed deadheading, it turned out, so the two of them had gone through and done that, and Professor Sprout had caught them at it and awarded Gryffindor fifteen points on the spot.

Ron arrived in the Great Hall a few minutes after Neville and Meghan, and seemed surprised to see the Pack-adults already there. Harry frowned as he saw his friend start along one edge of the Gryffindor table, stop, turn around, and come up the other side – the side where the Pack wasn't already sitting.

Is something wrong with him now?

But the mystery was solved as Ron slid into a place across from Harry.

Oh. He just wanted to sit with us, and all the seats are taken over here.

I'm stupid.

"Good morning, Ron," said Moony.

"Morning, Mr. Lupin."

"Ron, Ginny says hi," piped up Meghan from her place farther down the table.

"Oh – that was nice of her. Tell her I say hi back, would you, Meghan?"

"All right."

Ron started eating, but it wasn't at his usual breakneck pace. Today, he seemed slower... almost thoughtful, Harry thought... as if his friend had something on his mind.

Probably thinking about the match. I know I am.

"–And the Quaffle is taken by Katie Bell, it's Katie Bell for Gryffindor, off towards the Hufflepuff goals, ducks a Bludger, dodges the Keeper – but it's off the edge of the goal hoop, no good, Keeper Glendys

retrieves and passes to Hallman, Paul Hallman for Hufflepuff – Hallman passes to Dowland, Felicia Dowland has the Quaffle – no, she's passed it to Arnold, it's Jeremy Arnold with the Quaffle now, speeding toward the goal hoops, really flying there—”

Whack.

“OUCH, Bludger to the elbow and he's dropped it, nice play by one of the Weasleys, I can't tell them apart, don't think anyone can – Spinnet has it now, Alicia Spinnet for Gryffindor, she's going, she's going, she's aiming, Glendys blocking – NO! IT WAS A FAKE! AND GLENDYS WAS FOOLED! GRYFFINDORS SCORE!”

Lee Jordan's triumphant yell echoed around the stadium, prefacing cheers from slightly less than half the students – the Gryffindors and those Ravenclaws who preferred them over Hufflepuff to win the match – and groans and boos from the rest – the Hufflepuffs, the Ravenclaws cheering for them, and the Slytherins, most of whom detested Gryffindors as a matter of principle.

“How are we for time?” shouted Danger over the crowd noise.

Sirius checked his watch. “Just under four minutes – still good.”

It happened in a flash – something welled up inside her, something wild and harsh and rough – it felt almost like her Animagus form, but that only came when she called it – this had come unbidden –

Kill!

She shuddered as the voice rang through her, shaking her as if she were a bell and the voice her clapper.

Cub – in trouble – save him – kill!

Help me!

What's wrong? Remus' calm voice soothed her, his mind's touch on hers was strong and reassuring. He wouldn't let anything happen to her – he wouldn't let her hurt anyone –

I don't know – look – She flung herself open to him. I don't know what it is – but I can't stop it! And –

Aletha, beside her, jumped. “Danger – your hair – what's wrong with you?”

Danger raised a trembling hand to her head, feeling her hair beginning to stand out even more than usual. Something's about to happen – I know it –

She shrieked mentally as she felt it begin. Somewhere deep inside her, something tore loose from its restraints and howled in savage joy, and power began to swirl around her, intangible at the moment but not for long –

Oh no you don't, said Remus strictly, half to her, half to whatever it was that was trying to use her.

Abruptly, he was in front of her, down on one knee as the cubs had been that morning –

The cubs – Harry – this is about him, somehow –

But she had no more time for thought. The magic was still building around her and within her, and she still couldn't control it – it felt like trying to tame a lion with her bare hands –

Which you should be good at, a voice interjected. Since you already have. Arms pulled her down to the floor of the stands, to be held in safety against a strong, warm chest. And I'm going to help you, so you don't have to do this alone. Now, we have to get control of this – whatever it is. Start reining it in.

I can't!

You must.

But –

No buts. This power is out for blood, and if we don't stop it, someone's going to die. So we are going to stop it. You and I. Remus' tone took on the "alpha male" shading. Do you understand, female?

She gave a little whine of submission, as she would in Animagus form. Yes. I understand.

Good. Start calling it back in. It came from you, so it should return to you.

Danger called, and met with resistance. The power didn't want to return to its place within her, leashed and tamed, let out only on occasion – it wanted to be free, striking down everything that came in its way, everything that might threaten or harm the cubs –

No. You come back to me. I will use you when I deem it fit. You are not to act on your own.

The power resisted, trying to lash out. She blocked it, barely, feeling the shock of it reverberate through her – but she had blocked it. The shot had not gone through.

Authority, Remus prompted her. It's a rebellious cub. Show it your authority.

I don't have any –

Oh, no? Pretend you just caught Harry pranking your underwear drawer and he took off before you could give him a piece of your mind.

GET BACK HERE!

The power snapped back into her so fast it took her with it. She had only time to call one last warning back.

Something about Harry – protect him –

The last thing she heard was cheering.

The crowd was on its feet as Harry flew a victory lap around the stadium, holding the Snitch high. He'd beaten the record by seventeen seconds – not the thirty Moony had predicted, but still pretty good.

He flew past the Gryffindor section of the stands and held his hand out, collecting high-fives from everyone along the rail – the faces of his Pack flashed past, Ron, Hermione, Draco, Neville, Meghan, all grinning at him or cheering for him –

There was a commotion in the teachers' section. Harry didn't bother to look too closely.

Maybe Snape fainted when he saw me get the Snitch.

He grinned at that image as he made his way to the ground.

Padfoot, predictably, was the first one to him, laughing happily and mussing his hair more than it already was. "You won the match, you broke the record, you put Gryffindor in the lead for the House cup, and you won me money off Moony – you should have more days like this, Harry!"

Harry laughed. "I hope I do." He looked behind Padfoot. "Where is Moony? And Danger?"

Padfoot's face turned solemn. "Something happened during the match. Danger's unconscious – she's going to be all right, though, Letha's with her – and Remus said she said something about you before she passed out. Did you feel anything going on up there? Anything unusual or odd?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing."

That was all he had time to say, as the first wave of Gryffindors reached them, chanting "Harry! Harry!" and lifting him onto their shoulders. Padfoot was shunted aside, grinning, as they carried Harry away toward the castle for a victory celebration.

This has been one crazy day.

I kind of hope I do have more like it.

Aletha slipped out of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey had insisted on examining Danger, despite Remus' assurances that she was perfectly all right and would wake up in her own good time.

He was so sure he didn't even bother to stay – but I can't begrudge him and Sirius a little fun and celebrating...

And I'd rather like some myself...

"Mrs. Freeman-Black?"

Aletha jumped. "Heavens, Ron, you startled me!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to." The tall, red-haired boy came forward from the shadows. "Can I talk to you? Please?"

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I kind of have some questions I hoped you could answer."

"Well, if I can, I will. Shall we find a classroom?"

Harry tapped on the door of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey opened it. "I suppose you want to see her," she said before Harry could say anything.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, all right, but ten minutes only, mind. And you're not to go nagging her to come to that noisy party I know you're having up in that Tower of yours."

She opened the door farther, and Harry slid past her with a nod of thanks.

He almost didn't recognize the pale, bald man in the second bed from the door, until he saw the pile of purple fabric sitting on the nightstand – an unwrapped turban.

Professor Quirrell? What's he doing here?

The man's eyes were closed, so Harry didn't bother him, moving instead to the bed behind the screens, which held a sleepy-looking Danger.

"There you are," she said, smiling at him. "I thought you'd be along."

"Are you all right?" Harry sat down in the chair next to her bed.

"Oh, I'll be fine. Just a little backlash. I told Remus, and now I'm telling you – get yourself off to that party of yours. Don't be sitting here with silly old me. You need to stock up on Quidditch victory parties. You might miss out on more of them than you know."

Her voice had gone dreamy in a way that reminded Harry distinctly of Luna.

"But if you want to stay, you go ahead and stay for a while. Just don't go to sleep. That's my job." Her hand brushed uncertainly against her cheek, then reached out waveringly towards Harry, and he leaned in to help her complete the scent-touch, then returned it. Danger smiled, and her eyes drifted shut.

Harry yawned. He felt a bit sleepy himself – but he wouldn't go to sleep, he told himself. He would just sit here with Danger for a minute, and then he would go back upstairs and finish the party –

A rapping on the door startled him.

"Oh, what now," he heard Madam Pomfrey mutter as she went to answer it. The door opened. "Yes?" said her voice, sounding – brisk, Harry decided. Neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"I wish to see Quirinus." The voice was familiar – more than familiar – and it sent chills down Harry's back.

"He's not in any shape to receive visitors at the moment, Severus—"

“I am well aware of that, Poppy, I merely wish to see him. Alone.”

There was something in Snape’s tone that seemed to cow even the usually tyrannical Madam Pomfrey. “Very well, then, but you’re not to wake him, mind.”

“I do not intend to.”

Harry heard the door of Madam Pomfrey’s office close. Carefully, he peered through the slit where the fabric of the screen didn’t quite join up with the metal frame.

Snape was bending over Quirrell – doing something to his face – now he was standing up and taking out his wand – he said something in a low tone, and Harry jumped as a small bolt of blue light shot from the wand tip to Quirrell’s face, lighting it up for a moment –

“Can you hear me?” asked Snape quietly, putting his wand away.

“Yes.” Quirrell’s voice was flat, with no trace of his usual stutter.

“How were you rendered unconscious?”

“By magic.”

“A Stunning Spell?”

“No.”

“Some other form of magic?”

“Yes.”

“Who rendered you unconscious?”

“I do not know.”

“Very well.” Snape leaned closer to the man, and Harry caught only the words “door” and “Halloween”. He strained his ears, listening for Quirrell’s answer –

“S-S-Severus!”

Snape jerked upright as if he'd been burned. “Quirinus,” he said dourly.

“W-what were you d-d-”

Snape didn't even wait for the man to finish. “Pardon me for startling you. The darkness in here makes it difficult to see sometimes. I was concerned that you might not be breathing.”

“Oh, n-no, I'm fine, th-thank you.” Quirrell hadn't sat up, Harry noticed, he was conducting the conversation flat on his back.

“So I see. I take my leave, then.” Snape swept out, not bothering to close the door behind him, which suited Harry fine. He waited until Quirrell closed his eyes again, then sped out of the hospital wing, his mind racing.

What did Snape want to ask Quirrell – and why?

Aletha climbed through the portrait hole and beckoned Remus to her.

“We have a situation,” she said, her tone half-joking, half-serious.

“What kind of situation?”

“The kind that stems from Ron Weasley not being as stupid as everyone seems to think he is.”

(A/N: Important: Chapter 3 has been revised! It was too... too... canon. So I've completely redone one scene, something else happens now – so go back and read it and tell me what you think, about that and about this chappie, either here or at Yahoo!)

Chapter 13: Telling the Truth

“So what did you tell him?” asked Remus. The three adult Marauders had excused themselves from the party and were currently camped in an empty classroom, from which Sirius had evicted Peeves by conjuring a number of water bombs which also contained soap and encouraging him to go give Snape a shampoo.

Aletha sighed. “I told him, yes. He was right.”

Remus groaned. “Wonderful.”

“I did not give him a name, and I swore him to secrecy until we have a chance to tell his parents ourselves – which we probably should have done before this.”

Remus’ face flashed into annoyance, verging on anger. “Easy for you to say – you’re not the one it affects!”

“This affects all of us, Remus–”

“Yes, but I think I can honestly say it affects me a little more than it does you! You don’t know what it’s like, watching people get nervous around you, watching them edge away from you like you might jump on them any second–”

“Oh, come on, not everyone acts that way. I didn’t.”

“You’re a Muggleborn. Arthur and Molly are purebloods. I know how pureblood wizards think about werewolves–”

“Enlighten me,” said Sirius ever so blandly.

Remus took a breath to speak, stopped, and let it out in a semi-humorous sigh. “Bastard.”

“No, I don’t think so. My parents never pretended to love each other, but they wouldn’t have done anything to endanger the family line. Now Regulus – possibly.”

Aletha chuckled, and even Remus had to smile. “Do you ever take anything seriously?”

“Is there any other way I can take things?”

Remus pulled his wand out of his pocket by the tip, balanced it on his left palm and looked down its length with one eye as if trying to see if it were straight or not. “Well, you could always try looking at life from a different perspective.”

Aletha pushed her chair back about a foot as Sirius’ wand appeared just in time to block the Conjunctivitis Curse Remus threw at him. Remus dodged Sirius’ return jinx and fired off two of his own, and the duel was fairly begun, each man popping up from behind a desk just long enough to cast spells furiously at the other before ducking back down. Aletha had to shield herself once or twice when two spells hit in midair and ricocheted, but other than that she was free to watch the battle.

Sirius is faster with his wand, but Remus is sneakier – better at faking.

She tucked the observation away for another day.

“Finished?” she asked briskly a few minutes later, when neither had thrown a spell for a short while.

The men eyed each other warily, then nodded at the same moment.

“Fine, hold still.”

She removed the Jelly-Legs Jinx from Sirius, but let him deal with his own Twitchy Ears. Likewise, she dealt with the boils Remus had developed on one cheek (he’d ducked partly out of the way of Sirius’ Furnunculus), but allowed him to handle un-Petrifying his left hand.

“Feeling better?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Remus, flexing his newly softened hand.

"You look better. Not as tense, not as worried." Sirius was testing his legs, making sure they'd hold him.

"Excellent. Let's try to keep it that way for the rest of the night." Aletha opened the door of the classroom.

I should have known better than to try to bring this up now. Remus doesn't handle trouble well without Danger present, and vice versa. Ron promised me he wouldn't talk about it with anyone, so there's no emergency. We'll discuss it tomorrow, when we're all functioning again.

"Snape was trying to ask Quirrell questions?" said Ron in surprise. The five friends were in the red bedroom of the Hogwarts Den, the only place they knew for sure they wouldn't be overheard.

"Yeah. First it was about how he was knocked out – Quirrell said it was magic, but not a Stunner, and he didn't know what it was or who did it – and then Snape asked something about a door and Halloween."

"Third-floor corridor," said Hermione and Draco simultaneously.

"Quirrell was there—" Draco began.

"Snape saved him—" Hermione spoke over him.

"Quirrell said something about a diversion—"

"He thought the troll might have been one—"

"I don't think Snape believed him—"

"He must have been trying to find out what was there—"

Draco, about to speak, stopped as he realized Harry, Ron, and Neville were all staring at him and Hermione. "What?"

Ron shook his head. "That's scary enough when Fred and George do it. You two... it's just... weird."

“Do what?” the two asked in unison.

“When you... twin-talk.”

Hermione and Draco looked at each other and shrugged, still in unison. “We pretended to be twins for three years,” said Hermione.

“And we’ve been around each other for seven.”

“It shouldn’t be all that surprising...”

“That we can finish each other’s sentences by now.”

“What do you think Snape wanted to find out?” Neville asked Harry over this.

“Don’t know. Maybe why Quirrell was really trying to get through the door... you’re sure it was Quirrell at that door on Halloween?” Harry asked the “twins”.

Draco nodded. “Someone did an Opening Spell – Alohomora – and then started screaming, and then the door slammed and Snape did a Locking Charm. His voice is pretty distinctive, I think we would have known if it was him doing the Opening Spell too.”

“So unless Quirrell had a friend along, he opened the door,” said Ron. “Wonder why?”

“Maybe he wanted to steal the Stone,” suggested Hermione in a “well-that-should-have-been-obvious” tone.

“Or maybe he really was trying to keep it safe,” said Harry slowly, “and Snape wants to steal it.”

Silence filled the room as everyone thought about that.

It was a pleasant day for early March, but still rather cold and rainy, so Arthur Weasley was putting off working on his car until the weather got a bit better, since some of the alterations he made to it did tend to fill enclosed spaces with smoke. Instead, he and his neighbors were

spending their Sunday investigating some of the more interesting items he'd confiscated.

Sirius seemed rather taken with the pencil sharpener which made the pencil longer and blunter instead of shorter and sharper, and was off in a corner by himself with that and an inkpot. "I'd imagine he's trying to see if the charm can be modified to blunt a quill," said Remus, handing Arthur a part for the singing toaster he was reassembling. "I'm staying well out of it – if he's going to be foolish enough to provoke either Danger or Letha that way, I want to be able to say honestly that I had nothing to do with it."

Arthur chuckled. "Wise man. Your lovely wives can be quite formidable when they're minded to be."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "Allow me to reciprocate."

Arthur laughed aloud. "Yes, Molly can be quite the tyrant, can't she?"

"I've been meaning to ask you something about that."

"About Molly?"

"Yes, in a way." Remus leaned against the counter, casually. Perhaps a bit too casually – he seemed tense about something, Arthur noticed. "Suppose one had something to tell Molly. Something which might... unsettle her. For instance, if we had decided to reveal our true identities before everything happened. Would you be able to give me some guidance on how to go about that?"

Arthur set his tools down and looked searchingly at Remus. "Is there something of that sort which needs to be told?"

Remus nodded.

"Would you be willing to tell me?"

"Of course – damn, I made it sound as if I wasn't going to tell you, didn't I? I'm sorry, this has me a bit on edge."

“This is something about you, then. Something personal.”

“Yes. Quite personal. Although the whole family knows about it. And your Ron figured it out from things our three were saying – for which we probably ought to punish them, since they’ve actually put us in danger, in a way... but they trust Ron, and they haven’t told it to anyone else, and as far as I know they wouldn’t...” Remus shook his head, smiling self-deprecatingly. “I’m babbling, I know; I think I’m trying to get out of telling you.”

“I’m listening.”

Remus took one deep breath, then looked him in the eye. “I’m a werewolf, Arthur.”

Arthur was glad he wasn’t holding anything at the moment, since he was sure if he had been he would have dropped whatever it was, and some of his things were decidedly fragile.

“That’s our last remaining family secret, and I think you can understand why we tend to keep it under wraps. I’m not in any way dangerous – we have a certain sort of magic that keeps me under control on full moons – but I doubt we could convince anyone else of that. And with the children being who they are...” Remus sighed. “At the very least, there would be an uproar. At the most, there might be talk about unfit guardians – we might even lose custody of some of them – or, should I say, they might lose custody, since I’m not a legal guardian for any of the children – I can’t be.”

His eyes, which had moved to the far wall as he talked about the children, returned to Arthur’s face. “So, there it is. The truth.”

Arthur was rather proud that he hadn’t shown his first reaction – which had been, understandably, fear. He’d grown up on bedtime stories which featured werewolves as the scary things which came to get bad children. But the fear was inappropriate, he told himself sternly – he was a grown man now, and Remus was not about to hurt him. Moreover, Remus was his friend, and Arthur hoped he was a better man than to give up a friendship over something this trivial. He

ignored the frantic mental voice insisting that lycanthropy was hardly trivial.

We survived finding out about Sirius. We can survive this.

“You’re... not dangerous on full moons?” He wanted to be sure he understood perfectly before he started thinking about how to break this news to Molly.

“No – if I were, we’d never have set up the household the way we have, with the children living with all of us – I would have visited them, but not lived in the same house, it wouldn’t be safe at all. You may have noticed, Danger’s not very good with a wand, and I think you know that she never attended Hogwarts. Her magic was latent until around the age of twenty, and it seems that latent magic sometimes manifests, if it ever does, in unusual forms. In her case, what we somewhat melodramatically call ‘werewolf taming’. She prevents me from losing my mind during the full moon. The physical change still occurs – I take the form of a wolf – but mentally, I remain human and sane.”

“As sane as you ever are,” said a voice from the corner.

Arthur handed Remus one of the small rubber feet that had come off the toaster. Remus bounced it off the back of Sirius’ head.

“Ow!”

“I assume you knew about this,” said Arthur, turning to his other neighbor, who was looking indignantly at Remus and rubbing the place of impact.

“Since I was twelve and we were at Hogwarts together. His story of going home every month to visit his poor sick mother just didn’t fit together – especially not when he looked sick every time he got back...”

Dear Ron,

You should have been here when Mr. Lupin told Mum what he is (and why didn’t you tell me? And don’t say because they made you swear

you wouldn't... that's not good enough). She went completely white and her eyes got really big. Then she looked around like she wanted someone to shout "April Fool!" Then she heard me on the stairs. I tried to run, but she knew I was there.

My ears are still ringing. I think she yelled at me for half an hour straight. Now I'm grounded until July. Really and truly grounded – she's password-locked the broomshed and locked up all the Floo powder where I can't get to it, and I'm not allowed out of the house without her say-so. I don't think that's fair. All I did was listen in on one conversation, and you or one of the others would have told me soon enough anyway. Right?

See you at Easter,

Ginny

"What does she want me to tell her?" asked Ron grumpily, handing Ginny's letter to Harry. "That is why I didn't tell her."

Harry read the first few lines, enough to know what Ron was talking about, then shrugged. "What are you asking me for? She's your sister."

"What do you do when Hermione does something weird?"

Harry made sure that Hermione was deep in discussion of their latest Charms class with Draco before answering. "Usually either ignore her or tease her about it."

"And your family doesn't even care?"

"As long as nothing gets destroyed and no one gets hurt."

Ron sighed enviously. "Must be nice."

Across the table, Neville was rereading his letter.
Dear Neville,

I'm sorry to hear about the Slytherins. I hope they give up soon. You could always tell Draco or Harry about it, or Ron – they'll help you.

And you are not a bad wizard. Mama Letha says lots of good wizards start off slow and just take some time to get used to magic.

Something funny happened today. Yesterday, Danger made a big cake for Moony's birthday, and we all had pieces, so there was about two-thirds of it left. Then she told everyone to keep their hands off it, especially Dadfoot. We all promised we would. This morning, there was just a little piece of the cake left, and it had teethmarks on it.

You might not know this, but my Dadfoot is an Animagus. He can turn into a big dog. And he turned into a dog and ate the cake with his mouth, so he didn't lay a hand on it, just like he promised. Danger didn't think it was funny. She isn't letting him have any dessert for a week. Dadfoot says it isn't fair – he did just what she told him. I think it's funny.

Please write back soon and tell me everything that's happening there.

Your friend,

Meghan

Deciding to make as clean a sweep as possible, Remus found an opportunity later in the month to tell Gerald Lovegood about himself. He wasn't entirely surprised when the other man, far from being put off, was intrigued, and when Remus indicated he didn't mind questions, proceeded to ask quite a few.

"At least they were mostly intelligent questions," said Remus at home. "I'd expect no less from Gerald – eccentric he may be, stupid he's not – but I couldn't help being a bit wary. I had to tell a few people in the years between Hogwarts and the Pack, and they would always ask the most infuriatingly stupid questions. I once had someone ask me if I went looking for a mate on my transformation nights."

Do you?

Not anymore.

Both conversations ceased for a moment as Danger showered the table and Aletha with a mouthful of water.

“Hey!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry – blame him, he made me do it.” Danger indicated Remus by tone, her hands being busy cleaning up the mess she’d inadvertently made. “And what is that supposed to mean, anyway? ‘Not anymore’?”

“If you can’t figure it out, I’m not about to tell you.”

The women matched gazes.

“Men,” they said at the same moment, and in the same exasperated tone.

Valentina Jett’s first collection of short stories, *The Window into Winter*, was published in early April. Sirius had been writing short pieces for years, usually when he was blocked on something longer, and he had finally realized he had enough to make a book out of them.

“It’s a good thing, too,” he said, pacing around moodily. “The publishers were getting restless, and I seem to have dried up some.”

“What happened to that story we were working on together back in September?” asked Danger, hands busy with her loom.

“It’s one of these – the longest one, it’s probably more of a novella than a short story – but it was too long as it was. I was stretching it beyond where it wanted to go. It’s better that way. But now I feel like I’m just out of ideas.” He rolled his shoulders. “I don’t like it. I feel incomplete without something to be working on.”

“Part of it is probably spring fever,” said Aletha, leaning into the music room from the small room which had been made by enclosing part of the back patio, where she did her brewing, and where she was currently supervising Meghan’s first attempts at a simple potion. “I’ll make you a deal. As soon as Danger and I get comfortable in our Animagus forms – which should be any day now – we’ll take one day, let Pearl stay with the Weasleys or the Lovegoods, and just go running somewhere.”

"That sounds good. What's my side of the deal?"

"You need to quit griping."

"I am not griping."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm just stating how I feel."

"Three days ago, this was stating how you feel. Since it hasn't stopped since then, it now qualifies as griping."

"You know what you need, Padfoot?" asked Remus, looking up from the forms he was filling out. "You need something to get you out of the house. You need a job."

"I don't want a job."

"I know – but if you keep moping around here, we're going to get you one and make you go out of self-defense."

"I am not moping, and I am not griping. What is this, Pick on Me Day?"

"Yes, of course it is," said Danger with a wicked smile. "Every day is Pick on Sirius Day around here. Didn't you know that by now?"

"No, but it sure explains a hell of a lot."

Further conversation was distracted by a flash of blue light from the cauldron room and a happy cry.

Dear Meghan,

I'm glad to hear that you brewed a potion right. Maybe you can help teach me how to do it better. Even with Hermione to help me, I still make a lot of mistakes in Potions. Professor Snape scares me. I think he wants me to make mistakes so he can laugh at me and take points from Gryffindor.

No, the Slytherins haven't stopped bothering me yet. I keep hoping if I stay out of their way they'll get tired of it, but they keep going looking for me. I wish I could be an Animagus like we found out over Christmas. Then I could be invisible and they couldn't find me. Do you really think your brothers would help me?

Herbology is going really well. We're still working with Muggle plants that have magical properties, but Professor Sprout says next year we'll be studying some magical things that Muggles don't grow – maybe even Mandrakes! I can't wait!

Some of my other classes aren't so much fun. I keep doing things wrong in Charms and setting the classroom on fire. Professor Flitwick watches me closely, though, so I've never hurt anyone except me. I'm starting to get better at it, too – I only had to go to the hospital wing twice last month. And I haven't vanished anything in Transfiguration since January.

I really don't like Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lockhart doesn't like me, ever since I knocked his wig off. I didn't mean to, it was an accident, and I already apologized, but he keeps on giving me nasty looks in class anyway. He gives Harry nasty looks too, when he thinks no one's looking. I don't know why.

I'm kind of worried about what I'll mess up when we get to higher levels. I don't want to really hurt anyone. But I guess that's what Gran calls borrowing trouble. Maybe I'll get better as I get older.

Thank you for your letters. I really love getting mail from you. Please write back soon and tell me everything fun you're doing.

Your friend,

Neville

Draco was coming in from flying, some of his mandated time with the Nimbus Two Thousand so that it wouldn't be just Harry's broom and break the rules, when he heard raised voices and laughter nearby. He followed the sounds.

As he got closer, he began to identify the voices, and what he heard made him shift his weight onto the balls of his feet, check that he could get at his wand quickly, and set the broom aside behind a convenient statue, since it would only weigh him down if he did have to fight.

"Yeah, dance for us, Longbottom!"

"Hey, if he falls on it, will that make it a short bottom?"

"No, a flat bottom!"

"Come on, it's right up there, you can get it if you really try..."

Draco stepped around the corner and felt a surge of anger. All he could see was a circle of Slytherin backs, but he'd wager good money on who was in the middle of that circle – and from the wand Goyle was holding above his head, they weren't exactly being nice to Neville either.

Arseholes. It's five to one. Ten, if you count the girls.

He grinned. Except now it's ten to two. And one of the two is a Marauder.

But I need to be in a better position.

He slipped back out of the corridor and found another one which would lead him around and in on the other side of the Slytherins. As he had hoped, their circle wasn't quite complete – he could see Neville from this side. The other boy's legs looked to be stuck together.

The Leg-Locker Curse.

Still, Neville hadn't given up – he was determinedly jumping for his wand, which Goyle continued to hold out of his reach, a stupid grin all over his big dumb face. The other Slytherins – Draco wasn't certain about all their names, especially not the girls, but he was sure that all of them in his year were there – were howling their heads off watching.

No, not all of them. That one boy doesn't look like he thinks it's quite so funny as everyone else does... damn it, what's his name, I can never remember it...

Never mind. They're messing with the Pack.

Time to let them know why that's a really bad idea.

He stepped around the corner and cast the countercurse to the Leg-Locker. Neville, suddenly unbalanced by his legs springing apart in mid-jump, missed his landing and fell on his behind. Wincing at the delay, Draco crossed the fingers on his left hand and hoped his next spell would work properly.

"Expelliarmus!"

The wand Goyle was holding flew from his hand and rocketed toward Draco, who caught it, taking care not to let the Slytherins see how worried he'd been – he'd never tried to disarm a real opponent before, just Harry or Hermione or Ron in mock-duels at den-night...

"Nobody move," he instructed quickly, seeing hands going for wands. "Just let us leave and everything's all right."

Nott shook his head in disbelief. "What the hell, Black? Why are you doing this? For him?" His voice dripped contempt for Neville, who had recovered his breath and moved out of grabbing range on all fours, and was just now getting up. "A pathetic little magicless worm?"

"Stop calling him names."

"Why? It's true."

“First place, no, it’s not, second place, just because you’re a gutless coward who can’t pick on anyone who can defend themselves properly doesn’t mean I have to say it – but oops, I did.” Draco knew it wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to be provoking a gang of Slytherins, but he had his wand out and they didn’t, he’d bet on himself as a better wizard than any of them, and he was trying to buy Neville some time to get away. He was not doing it just because it was fun, he told himself firmly.

Though it was. A wave of gasps had gone around the Slytherins at the word “coward”, and Nott’s face was darkening in anger.

“Not only that, you can’t even take him on alone. You had to gang up on him. Ten to one, Nott – ten to one. Even if your opponent’s good, that’s stacking the deck a little, don’t you think?”

“None of them did anything,” snapped Nott. “I did the magic.”

“And then you let Crabbe – no, wait, sorry, you’re Goyle,” Draco corrected himself as the boy in question made a grunt of protest. “Sorry, I tend to get you mixed up. You’re both Slytherin, muscle-bound, stupid, and mean. You can see how I’d get confused.”

Both boys scowled and cracked their knuckles.

“And Dursley. Is it true you lick Nott’s boots? I hear such funny things about the Slytherins, it’s hard to be sure.” Draco looked around the group. “Girls, I’d suggest cross-house dating,” he said. “This bunch doesn’t show much promise.”

“You’re one to talk,” said Nott, his narrowed eyes fixed on Draco. “You should have been a Slytherin.”

“Should have been? What, are you the Sorting Hat now?”

“I know who you are.”

“Well done. We’ve been at school together for the past seven months and you’ve finally figured out who I am.”

"No, I know who you really are. Who you should have been. Who you still could be, if you could just see past what they've done to you."

"They? Who's they?"

"The Mudbloods."

"Watch your mouth," Draco warned, lifting his wand as if he were about to cast.

"Fine, the Muggleborns, if you insist. Whatever you call them, they've brainwashed you, blinded you to who you ought to be. Who you were born to be."

"And who's that?"

Nott rolled his eyes. "You really do think we're stupid, don't you?"

Don't answer that, don't answer that, don't answer that, don't...

"Yes."

Why does my mouth never listen to my brain?

Nott scowled. "Guess what. We're not."

"No, you're Nott. They're Dursley and Crabbe and Goyle and Parkinson and..."

"Shut up!"

"Love to, but you're not saying anything intelligent, and one of us has to, or this hallway will get so full of stupid it'll collapse."

"Shut up," repeated Nott. "You're just trying to confuse me."

"Like that's real hard."

"I said, shut up!"

Draco gave Nott his most gracious smile and sketched a shallow bow in his direction. "The floor is yours."

"I was saying that you ought to be Draco Malfoy. You were born a Malfoy, and that should never have changed."

What, so I could end up like you? A narrow-minded bigot and your daddy's good little boy?

"You ought to be a Slytherin. You ought to be one of us. And you still could be. If you wanted."

"Yeah, well, guess what. I don't want. So I'll just be going now." Draco deliberately turned his back on the Slytherins and started to walk away.

"You can't change some things," Nott said with a knowing smirk. "You can't change your face. Or your blood. Whatever you do, whatever you pretend, you'll always be the son of Lucius Malfoy."

Fear rushed over Draco at the mention of the name, old fear made suddenly new at Christmas with his dream and the realization that his birth father was everything he'd ever been told and more. Without thinking about it, he seized the fear and transmuted it into anger, white-hot anger, and felt the heat echoed in his pendant, which had been warm all this time but now was blazing hot –

He spun. "Attonitus!" he shouted, using his momentum to help him swing his wand in an arc across the Slytherins.

All ten were knocked off balance, some of them into the walls of the corridor, the rest onto their backs. Draco threw the curse again, this time straight at Goyle, knocking him backwards into a wall, possibly knocking him out, as he didn't show much interest in running, which the rest of the group did – Draco pursued them, shouting spells as he ran, and knocked one of the girls to the floor just before they all burst into the entrance hall – Nott was turning, pulling out his wand, apparently determined to fight now that he had room –

"Expelliarmus!"

The force of the spell slammed him into a wall, where he slid down it to the floor, out cold. Only one person Draco knew cast with that much power.

Harry!

And Hermione, he realized a moment later as two of the fleeing girls screeched and started trying to stamp out the flames suddenly licking at their robes. Only she can do that kind of blue fire.

Draco threw spells and hexes at the Slytherins, ducking their return fire. At one point, he felt something graze past him from behind, but when he turned, there was no one there. Daphne Greengrass was the closest person, and she was four feet away to one side, sitting on the floor staring at her leg, which had gone oddly wobbly.

Harry snatched up the Nimbus Two Thousand, shouldered it, and whistled the two notes that meant “retreat” as Hermione hit Dursley, the last Slytherin standing, with a Joint-Reversing Curse. Dursley fell to the floor, his knees bending the opposite way from usual, and the cubs scurried up the marble stairs, Neville coming seemingly out of nowhere to join them halfway up. They didn’t stop running until they were safely in the Gryffindor common room.

“I only counted eight,” said Harry when they had caught their breath. “Did we miss some?”

“No, I got two in the hallway,” said Draco. “How did you know where I was?”

“Lucky guess,” said Hermione, flexing her wand hand. “We knew you’d been out flying, so we figured if we worked our way downwards and listened, we’d find you eventually. And then we ran into Neville on the first floor, and he told us you were taking on all of Slytherin House by yourself.”

“How did that get started, anyway?” asked Harry, half curious brother and half disapproving alpha.

Draco shrugged. "I was bored."

"You were bored," repeated Hermione. "You cursed all the Slytherins in our year because you were bored?"

"No, I teased them because I was bored. I cursed them because they insulted me. Happy now?"

"He's not telling the truth," said Neville suddenly.

Harry and Hermione both looked at him.

"They were... bothering me. They cursed me and took my wand. Draco stopped them. If I hadn't been there, none of this would have happened."

"It's not your fault, Neville," said Draco, swallowing against a kind of sick feeling. The anger had faded now, and to replace it had come the awareness that he'd well and truly broken the rules this time. Even the Pack wasn't likely to let him off this one lightly, to say nothing of what Professor McGonagall was likely to do... "Oh. Here." He pulled Neville's wand out of his robes and handed it over.

"So did you curse them because they cursed Neville?" asked Hermione.

"No. I was going to tease them some and then walk away. But Nott..."

"Insulted you?" asked Harry.

Draco nodded.

"What did he call you that made you so mad? I thought this thing was going to burn my robes off." He tapped his pendant.

Draco stared at the carpet. "It was really stupid," he admitted in a half-hearted mumble. "I shouldn't have been so mad about it. It really doesn't matter."

"It mattered then," said Hermione. Draco heard her moving, standing up and coming around behind him, leaning over the back of his chair. Her hand rested for a moment on his shoulder, then she came around and sat on the arm of his chair. "It mattered to you. You know we won't laugh. You can tell us."

"He said... first he said I should have been a Slytherin."

Harry snorted. "What is he, the Sorting Hat?"

Draco smiled slightly. "That's what I said." The smile faded. "And we argued some, and then he said no matter what I did, or what I pretended, I'd always be the son of Lucius Malfoy."

There was a long silence.

Hermione's hand made its way down onto Draco's lap and found one of his. "Brother," she said quietly. "Sort-of twin. Annoying little git."

"I'm not little – I'm older than you are," protested Draco reflexively.

"Fine, annoying big git."

Harry chuckled with them. "Brother," he said in his turn, sliding to the floor beside Draco's chair and punching him lightly on the knee. "Friend. Best beta any alpha could want."

"Meghan was right," said Neville from across the circle of chairs. "She said I should ask you for help. But I didn't even need to ask. You just helped me."

We claim you, said their words silently. You belong to us, not to them. You belong in our world, not in theirs. We are not pretending, and we will not give you up.

Draco swallowed again, but this time against another kind of emotion. Unwilling to speak aloud for fear of letting it out, he lifted the hand Hermione wasn't holding and made a sign.

Thank you.

"You're welcome," said Harry. "Come on, Neenie – Hermione – we need to think of an excuse."

"Excuse?"

"For why we cursed all of Slytherin House. You do realize we're going to be in enormous trouble."

"We were helping Draco – he was outnumbered!"

"Fine, Draco needs an excuse. Do you mind if we think one up for you?" asked Harry.

Draco shook his head.

"Come on, Neville, three heads are better than two. Four would be even better – has anyone seen Ron?"

Draco tuned out the discussion in favor of his own thoughts.

Whatever they come up with, I'll tell Professor McGonagall the truth later. I overreacted to what Nott said and lost my temper. They were just trying to get me out of a bad situation I got myself into. I'm the only one who should be punished for it.

That decision made, his mind rebounded to the way his family and friends had told him, although in far more polite terms, that Nott was full of it. It reminded him somewhat of Danger's words the night she had intervened in his dream.

Draco knew only too well what his father would say about that the next time they met – for there was almost bound to be a next time; if they could dream together, they were too tightly linked, as much as he wished otherwise, not to meet again. Whether it was, as he hoped, only in dreams, or if by some unforeseen circumstance they came face to face in the waking world, he was almost certain what Lucius would taunt him with.

“Can’t fight me by yourself, boy? Need a woman to do your fighting for you?”

And as he had just been reminded, it was those things which he had not settled to his own satisfaction that his enemies could successfully make him angry with.

And Lucius is my enemy, and much older and more experienced than I am. I can’t afford to lose any edge I might have, and getting angry will make me do that.

He recalled a breathing exercise Aletha had taught him, a combination of clearing out the lungs and relaxing the spirit. Inhale to a five-count, exhale in six beats, rest for four, repeat...

Once he had settled into his rhythm, he quickly found the answer to why he shouldn’t be ashamed that Danger had helped him.

I’m only eleven – I shouldn’t be expected to fight a full-grown wizard on my own yet. When I’m older and stronger, the Pack will let me fight my own battles. But for right now, I still need their help. And it doesn’t matter, or it shouldn’t, that it was one of the Pack-mothers who helped me. She knows the most about dreams, and besides, she beat you, didn’t she?

Draco smiled, realizing he was already subconsciously addressing his justification to an imagined Lucius.

Maybe he won’t think it’s good enough. But I do.

That’s what matters.

“Mr. Black,” said an icy voice from right in front of him. He jumped and looked up.

Professor McGonagall was standing over him, arms crossed, looking angrier than Draco had ever seen her.

“Come with me,” she said.

(A/N: OK, yes, it took a little longer than I was expecting. Life's been a tad bit hectic around here, and then last night I got a bit ill... but I'm all better now, and here is your chapter – and the next one will be up in short order – in case you can't tell, we're starting to get into climactic territory!

I need input, and I hope this doesn't count as interactive (in other words, please don't report me) – shall I start posting review responses on my bio page, the way Neurotica does? Let me know in a review – hugs and love!)

Chapter 14: In Good Time

Harry sat still and tried not to swallow nervously.

This is bad.

Professor McGonagall had collected Harry, Draco, Hermione, and Neville from the Gryffindor common room and led them to her office without saying anything except “Come with me”. Now she was standing over them, arms folded, face set in lines of extreme displeasure.

“Ten,” she said. “Ten of your schoolmates in the hospital wing. And all of them – the ones who are awake – say the same thing. They were attacked, without provocation, by four Gryffindor first years.”

“Without–” Draco’s head snapped up. “That’s not true! They started it!”

“How so, Mr. Black?”

“They were...” Draco looked down the line at Neville.

“They cursed me, Professor,” said Neville in a small voice. “And stole my wand. Everyone else was just trying to help me. It’s my fault.”

“No, it’s not,” said Draco quickly. “I was just trying to help Neville, and I lost my temper with the Slytherins. It’s my fault.”

“Does anyone else want to take the blame?” asked Professor McGonagall tartly. Harry and Hermione shook their heads dumbly. “So. You cursed ten Slytherins to make up for one curse placed on Mr. Longbottom. Does that not seem a bit... overenthusiastic?”

Harry wasn’t sure how to answer this, but it seemed to be a rhetorical question anyway, as Professor McGonagall reached behind her, picked up a piece of parchment, and continued. “Mr. Nott has a concussion. Mr. Crabbe has severe boils on several parts of his body. All of Mr. Dursley’s joints reversed, down to his knuckles. Miss Bulstrode’s hair entirely out of control, threatening even her ability to

breathe. Miss Greengrass – Madam Pomfrey is not even sure what happened to her. One of her legs seems to have turned green and flexible.”

Harry frowned. Nott he had taken care of himself, he’d seen Draco hex Crabbe, Hermione had accounted for Dursley and Millicent Bulstrode...

“Luckily, all the changes have been reversible. But I have never, in all my years, been more ashamed of students of my own House. Detentions for each of you, and forty points will be taken from Gryffindor.”

“Professor – forty?” burst out Hermione.

“Yes, Miss Granger-Lupin. Forty. Each.”

Harry’s heart sank to his feet. One hundred sixty points...

“Professor, that’s not fair,” blurted Draco. “You can’t take points off for Neville. He can’t have done anything. He didn’t have his wand.”

“Mr. Longbottom?”

Neville nodded. “Draco took it away from Goyle,” he said. “I didn’t get it back until we were in the common room.”

Professor McGonagall looked hard at the four of them for a moment. “Very well. Fifty points from Gryffindor for the three of you, then. The detentions stand as before, and I will be writing to your families. Now back to your common room, all of you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Draco as soon as they were out of Professor McGonagall’s office.

“For what?”

Draco looked at Harry as if he were crazy. “For starting this – for getting us in trouble – for losing Gryffindor one hundred fifty points?”

"It's not all your fault, Draco," said Hermione unhappily. "We could have done something different."

"Like what?"

"We could have just covered you until you had a chance to get away," said Harry. "We didn't have to come in fighting." Maybe I didn't start this, but I made it a lot worse by casting first and thinking afterwards...

"I shouldn't ever have been down there," said Neville miserably. "But I thought I'd forgotten my Potions book, and I was going back to look for it..."

"Neville, no matter what you told Professor McGonagall, this isn't your fault," said Hermione.

"Nor is it yours!" Neville shouted, making the cubs jump. "You were just trying to help me! You shouldn't get in trouble for trying to help people!" He suddenly realized he was yelling and seemed to collapse, shrinking into himself. "I'm sorry," he said in a very small voice.

Harry shook his head. "Don't be. You're right." He kicked the stone wall, accomplishing nothing except to hurt his foot. "It's not fair." He knew he sounded like a whiny little kid, and he didn't care. He'd done something stupid again, and not even two months after he'd promised himself he wouldn't.

"Easter holidays start next week," said Hermione, in the tone of someone trying to save an unsalvageable situation. "We'll be home for a while. Maybe people'll forget about it before we get back."

Draco stared at her. "Forget? Forget about one hundred fifty house points? They might as well forget what House they're even in, Neenie! This is huge! Our names are mud!"

Hermione's lips went back, and she made a sound so like an angry cat that Harry half-looked around for Mrs. Norris. "Say that again."

Draco took a quick step away from her. "I'm not fighting you, Hermione."

"No, you're not, I'm fighting you! This is all your fault!" Hermione swung a furious slap in the direction of Draco's face.

Draco ducked, and Harry caught Hermione's hand as it traveled around. "Stop it," he snapped at her. "This is all of our faults, and fighting won't help anything. It might even get us in more trouble, and we don't need that."

"I don't care! Let me go, let me go, let me go right now!" Hermione writhed in his grip, trying to break free. Harry hung on to her, then suddenly had an idea.

Being careful to take her weight on himself first, he kicked her legs out from under her, then lowered her to the floor. Quickly, before she could get up again, he jumped around to her front side and sat down on her legs, pinioning her hands with his own and catching her eyes. "Stop it," he said as sternly as he could, holding eye contact with her. "Stop it now."

She hissed again and tried to scratch him. He tightened his grip around her wrists and showed her his teeth, even going so far as to growl slightly at her. "Enough," he said, and after a few more seconds, she dropped her eyes to the floor, and the tension bled out of her body.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. Harry got off her legs and sat beside her, and Draco sat down on her other side. They'd have to move in a moment, they were blocking the hallway, Harry knew, but just right now, Hermione needed comfort, and this was the best way to give it to her.

"Everyone's going to hate us, aren't they?" she asked miserably.

"Probably," said Draco fatalistically.

Harry glared at Draco. "You're not helping," he said.

"You want me to lie?"

Harry sighed. "No. You're right."

Neville had been watching all of this intently from near the end of the hall, looking rather puzzled but intensely interested. Now he looked away, down one of the other halls that connected with this one, and suddenly waved frantically.

"What—" Draco began, but didn't get any farther, as Ron burst into view beside Neville.

"Where have you been? There's something wrong with the house point counters, we're down a hundred and fifty, and have you heard, somebody put all the first year Slytherins in the hospital wing!"

"There's nothing wrong with the house point counters," said Hermione unhappily. "We just lost fifty points each for Gryffindor."

"You did? How?"

"By cursing all the first year Slytherins into the hospital wing," said Harry.

Ron opened his mouth, then closed it again, thinking. "Good trade-off," he said finally.

Hermione burst into near-hysterical laughter.

The boys all stared at her. "What's so funny?" asked Draco.

"Not everyone hates us," she managed to say, pointing at Ron, before laughter claimed her voice again.

Over the next few days, though, it was clear that Ron was in a very small minority. Just about everyone else was extremely annoyed with the stupid first years who had destroyed Gryffindor's chances of winning the House cup and breaking Slytherin's winning streak. Even the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws were angry, and didn't bother to hide it. It was like the beginning of the year all over again, with people pointing and whispering at Harry and Draco, except that now they weren't bothering to whisper.

“Idiots.”

“Out-of-control maniacs.”

“Should have been kicked out.”

“Should have had their wands snapped.”

The Slytherins were strutting around the school as if they owned the place. Theodore Nott and some of the others, once they had gotten out of the hospital wing, were minor celebrities, and gloried in it. And Snape...

Harry wished fervently that they had managed to get themselves into trouble on any day other than a Thursday. In Potions the next day, Snape was in the closest thing to a good mood that Harry had ever seen him in, and that was never good news for Gryffindors. Not only was the potion for the day fiendishly difficult, he assigned working partners – across the Houses.

By the end of the class, no one had successfully completed their work. Three cauldrons had exploded, including, unsurprisingly, Neville's, and even Hermione's usually flawless results had been replaced with a sticky, bad-smelling mess. She was almost in tears.

“No points for today's work,” said Snape silkily. “To make up your grade, you will all write an essay, detailing what went wrong with your potion and how to prevent it from occurring again. Two and a half feet, due after the holidays. Dismissed.”

“But I don't know what went wrong!” Hermione protested as they climbed the stairs. “I did everything right, I know I did...”

“Except that Millicent Bulstrode added a handful of acorn caps when you had your back turned,” said Ron grimly.

Hermione's eyes widened. “She... she sabotaged me!”

“Nott did it to you,” said Draco to Harry. “I spotted him stirring yours the wrong way around.”

Harry growled deep in his throat. "And since the Slytherins did it, they know what went wrong with the potions, and we don't. So they can do the essay, and we can't."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Maybe we can. If we all get together and try to remember what we saw them doing..."

"It's worth a try," said Draco. "Hoy, Dean, wait up!"

With what everyone had noticed the Slytherins doing during class, and the better Potions students checking their notes for what might have caused the different failures, the Gryffindor first years were eventually able to figure out more or less what had gone wrong, or rather been made to go wrong, with all their potions.

"This doesn't make up for yesterday," warned Seamus Finnegan. "We're still mad. But..."

"Maybe not quite as mad," Dean Thomas finished for him, accepting a scroll from Hermione that detailed what Dursley had done to his potion that had caused it to turn so runny it leaked out through the bottom of the solid cauldron.

The cubs' eyes met briefly. For right now, they knew, not quite as mad would have to be enough.

"How do you think it happened?" asked Ron after dinner. "Did Snape tell them to do it?"

"No." Neville, back from the hospital wing with his fingers regrown, sounded unusually certain. "It was Nott's idea. I heard Dursley and Goyle laughing about it while they were getting treated. He came up with it yesterday after he got healed up, and all he had to do was ask Snape if he would please let all the Slytherins work with a Gryffindor partner today." He made a face. "To 'help improve inter-House relations'."

Ron scowled. "Makes me want to go find a Slytherin and punch his face in."

Draco snickered. "It worked, then."

"Why?"

"You don't want to punch two Slytherins."

Ron threw his quill at Draco.

The five got a compartment to themselves on the train ride home on Sunday. It wasn't hard, as no one wanted to sit with them. "At least we get a vacation from this," said Draco.

"What do you think the Pack's going to say?" asked Hermione worriedly.

"I don't care. Whatever they say, they only ever say it once. Then it's over. Besides, Padfoot and Moony don't have any room to talk. Not with some of the stuff they did when they were at school."

"I don't think they ever put ten people in the hospital wing at once, though," said Harry absently, most of his attention on his game of chess with Ron. "Knight to B-7."

"Botheration," complained the black knight, moving as he'd been commanded. "I was just getting comfortable."

"You're not supposed to get comfortable," said Ron, tapping one of his own pieces to wake it up. "My knight to B-7."

Harry groaned as his knight was toppled from his horse. "How'd I miss that?"

"Same way you always do – I made you look somewhere else." Ron did a little victory dance in his seat.

"That's just disturbing," said Hermione, shaking her head.

"You don't like it, you don't have to watch it," said Ron in time with his dance.

About ten moves later, Harry surrendered, and Draco took his place behind the chessboard. Hermione and Neville dealt him into their game of Wizarding Go Fish. The cards all wiggled around when one was told to “go fish”, so that getting hold of one, and keeping hold of one’s hand, was much more difficult than in the Muggle version. The real challenge of the game was not in making matches, but in keeping the cards from getting away or showing themselves to one’s opponents.

It was getting close to dinnertime when the train pulled into King’s Cross. Ron and Draco packed away the chessmen as Neville helped Hermione chase down the last of the Go Fish cards. Harry lifted Hedwig down from the luggage rack, reached into the cage to stroke her head feathers, then tapped the green wrapping on one of the bars of her cage. “Wake up,” he said.

Siss lifted her head and uncoiled her length from the bar, curling up in Harry’s hand. “We have arrived? I am glad.”

“You want to get back to the Den?” Harry handed Hermione Hedwig’s cage.

“I care little where we go, so long as you are content. For two days, you have scented of unease. I hope you will be better here in your own nest.”

“I hope so too.”

Siss slithered up his arm to her usual place. “It is still the trouble with the marks of status, then?”

“Yeah. That’s probably going to take a while to go away.”

“Probably. Many are unhappy when they lose status. For myself, I was never one to covet it. I know my own worth, and so do my nest-mates. The opinions of others matter not.”

Harry sighed. “I wish I felt that way.”

“Are not your feelings your own, eggling? Can you not control them?”

"Of course I can..." Harry stopped, struck. "I guess not. Not if it bothers me what other people think. Right?"

Siss' tone took on the indulgent feel that equated to a chuckle. "My eggling begins to acquire wisdom."

Harry had a strong feeling she was teasing him, but let it go. "So how do I stop caring so much what everyone else thinks?"

Siss flicked her tongue in and out several times, something she did when she was thinking hard. "It is not an easy thing to explain. Perhaps later, when I have had some time to think it over..."

"Harry?"

Harry jumped slightly and turned. He, Ron, and Siss were alone in the compartment.

"What's Parseltongue for 'you look like a nutter talking to your shoulder'?" asked Ron, grinning.

Harry grinned back, lifted one side of his trunk, and voiced a sibilant sentence. "That's 'you look winter-sick talking to your own tail'," he explained as the boys hauled their trunks off the train. "Since snakes don't have shoulders."

They joined the line waiting to go through the barrier. "Are you ever going to tell anyone else about... you know." Ron pointed to the shoulder where Siss lay coiled, hidden under Harry's shirt and jacket. "Talking to her and her friends."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe sometime. Lots of people think it's Dark, though, so probably not unless I really need to."

They passed the barrier and looked around. "There they are," said Ron, pointing out a concentration of redheads.

"There's your family," said Harry. "Where's mine?"

“Aren’t they there?” Ron squinted at the crowd surrounding his mother and brothers. “Huh. Where would they be?”

“Harry!” shouted a girl’s voice from a bit farther to the boys’ left. Craning his neck, he finally spotted Meghan waving to him from Padfoot’s shoulders, with the rest of the Pack nearby, greeting Draco and Hermione.

“See you,” said Ron.

“See you.” Harry turned his trolley to the direction of the Pack and had to stop suddenly as Theodore Nott appeared seemingly out of nowhere in front of him. “Sorry,” he said.

Nott smiled nastily. “Yes, you are. Thanks, Potter. It was worth a trip to the hospital wing to put Gryffindor in last place. Any time you want to do it again, just let me know.”

Harry’s hands tightened on the bar of the trolley. He wanted to get a hold of Nott, to really teach him a lesson, since the first one obviously hadn’t worked...

“Whatever you are thinking of doing, do not,” came a sharp hiss in his ear.

“I’ll do that,” he answered as politely as he could manage. “Excuse me.” He pushed his trolley past Nott and over to the Pack. “Thanks, Siss,” he said very quietly.

“I would do as much for anyone, and more for you, my eggling.”

There was no time for more conversation, as Meghan literally descended upon him from Padfoot’s shoulders.

“Why aren’t you over with the Weasleys?” he asked Danger, the first Pack-parent to greet him.

“Molly’s been a bit edgy around Remus ever since the... revelation. We think it’ll pass, but for right now there’s no reason to force the issue. How are you?”

Harry looked at the floor. "You know what happened on Thursday?"

Danger tapped his chin, bringing his eyes back to hers. "I know Professor McGonagall's version. I'll be interested in hearing what you three have to say."

Harry nodded, knowing from experience that the Pack would be fair in their decision about punishment.

Possibly more than fair. It was some pretty impressive magic, after all.

Meghan came bouncing back from saying her hellos to Neville, who was now leaving with his grandmother, and jumped on Draco from behind, making him yelp loud enough to silence a section of the station. "I love you," she said sweetly in his ear.

"That's nice," gasped Draco, hand on his chest. "Try loving me some way that won't give me a heart attack."

"Let's go home," said Padfoot. "You four can mess around all you want once we're there."

They left King's Cross and hailed taxis to take them to a street corner near the Leaky Cauldron, from where they Flooed to the Den.

Harry fell out of the fire on top of his trunk, grateful it hadn't been the other way around, and moved quickly out of Hermione's way.

Home.

It was nice to be back.

As Harry had expected, the Pack-parents were not hard on them once they had heard all the circumstances surrounding the hexing of the Slytherins. In fact, Padfoot pulled Harry aside and congratulated him on some excellent curses, and Harry noticed smiles on Draco's and Hermione's faces later that made him wonder if Padfoot hadn't done the same for them.

“In this case, I think the natural consequences are enough punishment,” said Letha over dinner. “Losing one hundred fifty points. That has to hurt. I don’t think even you four ever pulled that off.”

“No, I think our biggest haul ever was eighty,” said Padfoot. “For the ‘drunk dog’ thing.”

“No, you three got docked thirty apiece once,” said Moony. “For something I was smart enough to have nothing to do with.”

“And what might this be?” asked Letha with a great deal of interest.

“You mean you don’t remember the Great Hogwarts Noodle Incident?”

Letha’s eyebrows rose. “The Noodle Incident – that was you?”

Padfoot was sliding down in his chair as if wishing someone would Vanish him.

“Do enlighten those of us who weren’t there,” urged Danger, smiling wickedly.

“Yeah, please?” echoed the cubs.

Moony laced his fingers together. “Well, it all started with a comic book, an action figure, and a stuffed tiger...”

The Easter holidays weren’t nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones, for several reasons. There were no presents and no party to look forward to, for one thing. For another, the teachers had piled on homework – Snape’s essay was one of the least of their worries. This wouldn’t have bothered Harry and Draco nearly so much if Hermione hadn’t been so crazy about it. She kept nagging them about what they’d finished, quizzing them at odd hours of the day, and started drawing up study schedules, color-coded by subject.

“You haven’t left any time for meals,” said Harry in bewilderment, studying one of the schedules.

"I can study while I eat," said Hermione. "But I'll leave mealtimes free on yours."

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours."

"Why are you making one for me?"

"Because you need to study too. Or do you not want to get into second year?"

"Of course I want to get into second year, but why do we need to start studying now? We've got all of term to do it in, that's ten weeks."

"Ten weeks isn't very long, really, if you think about it. And you and Draco and Ron don't have as good of memories as I do, so you'll need to study really even more than I do, and you have Quidditch practice, so that makes it even harder..."

Harry slipped out of the room as Hermione continued.

Another annoyance of the holiday had to do with Ron. He wasn't coming over nearly as often as he usually did, and one morning, frustrated with a knotty question and wanting someone to commiserate with more than he wanted an actual answer, Harry scribbled a note and sent it off with Hedwig.

Ron –

Are you ill or mad at us or something?

– Harry

The answer came five minutes later.

No. Can you meet me at the orchard in ten minutes?

Harry slammed his Transfiguration book shut and ran to find his shoes.

“Here he comes,” Hermione called from her perch. She started climbing down, so as to be on the ground when Ron arrived.

Harry and Draco shook his hand gladly. “We’ve been missing you,” said Harry. “Something wrong?”

Ron looked unhappy. “It’s Mum,” he said, gingerly returning Hermione’s hug. “She’s gone over kind of funny since Mr. Lupin told her... you know. She keeps making these weird excuses why I shouldn’t go to your place or have you over to ours.”

The cubs nodded. “Moony says it’s happened before,” said Hermione. “Other times he’s told people... what he is. A lot of people are scared of werewolves, even when it’s not full moon out.”

“It doesn’t make any sense, though!” Ron burst out. “What’s going to happen to me from being around you? It’s not like any of you are werewolves – like Harry said, I’d know, I spend every bloody full moon night with you down in the Den! And he told Dad he wasn’t dangerous even at full moons – do you do the den thing at home too?”

Three nods answered him.

“Does – is he there? Do you see him when he’s...”

“Transformed?” finished Draco. “Always. Danger talks for him, or we link up and talk that way.”

“It’s just like having Padfoot around,” said Harry. “He’s a dog Animagus, you remember from Christmas – even when he’s in dog form, he’s still Padfoot. Moony transformed is still Moony, just in wolf shape.”

“That’s what I thought.” Ron nodded, slightly flushed but looking satisfied. “That’s what I thought. So the werewolf tamer thing you talked about in Defense is real, Harry?”

Harry flushed himself. “Yeah. Danger is one. But don’t tell anyone – please. I was stupid to bring it up.”

“Danger and Moony want to keep it quiet,” said Draco. “Not just so no one knows about him, but so she doesn’t have to get tested or answer questions or anything – but I think Aunt Andy, remember her from the party, Healer Tonks? I think she’s done some stuff with them. Tests and things. But not officially, just as kind of a friendly thing.”

“Where’d you hear that?” asked Hermione.

“Pearl told me.”

“She’d know. She’s the one still living at home.”

“She’s been writing to Neville pretty regularly, hasn’t she?” asked Ron. “About once a week. And he’s writing back this term. How much younger is she again?”

“Three years,” said Hermione. “She’ll be a first year when we’re fourth years.”

Ron pulled his hood up as the wind blew through the orchard, shaking accumulated rainwater down from the trees onto everyone’s heads. “Long time for her to wait.”

“She’ll live,” said Draco. “So is your mum not letting you out of the house, or is she just making you do chores before you can come over, or what?”

“She keeps saying I have to study,” said Ron in deep disgust. “And when I tell her I study better with you lot around, she says I have to learn to do it on my own. Why? It’s not like we’re going to get split up or anything – we’ll be in all the same classes at least one more year, then we pick some new ones for third year, and then we have all the same ones until after O.W.L.s in fifth year...”

A discussion of what new classes they were likely to take in third year ensued, and none of them noticed the time passing until –

“Ron!”

Everyone jumped.

“Ginny, you scared me!” said Hermione, running to embrace the younger girl. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks. Ron, Mum says come home right now.” Ginny glanced at the cubs. “And I wouldn’t tell her who you were with if I were you.”

“She’s not still on about that, is she?”

Ginny nodded grimly.

Ron groaned. “Merlin’s beard, why can’t she just get over it already? I’d better go.”

“We’ll see you back at school if not before,” said Harry, shaking Ron’s hand again.

“Have a good rest of the holiday,” said Hermione. “I’ll send you over the study schedule I made up for you by owl.”

“Don’t open it,” Draco advised Ron in a whisper.

“I heard that,” snapped Hermione. “Open it if you know what’s good for you, Ron Weasley.” She stormed away, leaving the boys and Ginny looking after her a bit bemusedly.

“See you,” said Harry again before he and Draco followed Hermione.

“See you,” Ron called after them.

The holidays eventually ended in the usual flurry of trunk-repacking and looking for lost items all over the house, and the cubs were on board the Hogwarts Express almost before they knew what was happening.

Ron joined them just before the train left. “Left my trunk in with the twins and their lot,” he explained. “Have to be careful opening it, they’ll probably have put something in.”

“What do they think about Moony?” asked Hermione curiously. “Or don’t they know?”

“The whole family knows now, Dad told them while they were home, and swore them all to secrecy. Percy was all shocked and did the ‘but he seems so nice’ bit, like Mr. Lupin was a murderer or something.”

“No, that was Padfoot,” said Harry, making everyone laugh.

“I think the twins think it’s cool,” continued Ron. “They didn’t look scared, at any rate, and that’s an improvement over Mum. Dad said he thinks she’ll get over it eventually, ‘in her own good time’ was how he put it.”

“When did he say that?” asked Draco.

“When I asked him if I could go over to your house. And he said, more or less, no, not until Mum gets over her little fit.” Ron made a face. “I hope she gets over it before the summer.”

“Me too,” said Harry ardently. “Especially with Padfoot dropping hints about taking all of us to a professional Quidditch match.”

Ron’s face lit up. “D’you think he could get us tickets to see the Cannons?”

“I don’t think there’s any trouble getting tickets to see the Cannons,” said Draco. “It’s usually more a question of, are you going to have to pay for them, or are they giving them away?”

The term was officially begun, thought Hermione, pulling out a book – the boys were having a fight over Quidditch.

All we need now is to have Snape take a few points from Gryffindor and have them ask to copy my homework.

Snape did indeed take points from Gryffindor, in every Potions lesson – but he took them one or two at a time, always with some comment like, “Since your House doesn’t have many points left to lose, Miss Granger-Lupin,” or “I make it a point not to aid those in quest of losing the most points for their House personally, Black”. Harry thought he’d

rather Snape take more points and skip the comments – which, he was sure, Snape knew, and was therefore acting accordingly.

One odd thing did occur in the first few days of term. Dudley Dursley came up to Harry after dinner on Tuesday. “I want to talk to you, Potter.”

“So talk.”

“Not here. Somewhere alone.”

A Slytherin wants to be alone with me? “All right. Let’s find a classroom.” Follow me, he signaled Draco and Hermione. Hide. Listen.

Dursley led the way to an empty room on the ground floor and went in first. Harry followed him and pulled the door almost shut, so that his siblings could hear. “What’s on your mind?”

“I know who you are,” said Dursley, staring at him almost challengingly.

Harry waited.

“I know we’re cousins.”

Harry started laughing. He couldn’t help it. It was so far from what he’d been expecting.

“Yeah?” he said when he’d finally got his breath back. “So we’re cousins. So what?”

“You knew?”

“Yeah, I knew. My mum and your mum were sisters. Except mine was a witch and yours is a Muggle. Right?”

Dursley nodded warily. “How’d you know that?” he asked.

“My guardians told me. I used to live with your family when I was really little. Until they took me away.”

“They stole you,” said Dursley – was it angrily? It sounded like he was mad. “We’re your family. They shouldn’t have done that.”

Harry stared at him in his turn. “Your parents didn’t want me. My guardians did. Why should they have left me with somebody who didn’t want me?”

“How do you know they didn’t want you?”

“If somebody sticks a baby in a bloody cupboard and ignores him when he cries,” Harry snapped, his patience gone, “that’s a pretty damn good sign they don’t want him!”

“My parents never did that!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, then either my guardians or your parents are liars, and I have a hunch I know which ones it is!” Harry spun around, slammed the door open, and ran out of the classroom and out of the castle, not knowing what he was running to, or from, only knowing that he had to run...

“Harry?”

He came to a halt and looked up – and up, and up. “Hello, Hagrid,” he said.

Hagrid’s face, what Harry could see of it behind his beard, held an expression of concern. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“No, I’m fine. Why?”

“Well, yeh came boltin’ out here pretty fast, and there’s people followin’ yeh...” Hagrid waved back towards the castle. Harry turned

to look. Draco and Hermione were jogging across the lawn, Hermione pressing one hand to her side.

"Are you all right?" Draco called to him.

"Fine," Harry called back, crossing his fingers behind his back.

"I saw that," said Hagrid sternly. "Tell the truth, now. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really, Hagrid. I'm fine."

Hagrid shrugged. "Well, if yeh ever need ter talk, my door's always open fer yeh. I was just about ter make tea, as a matter of fact, if anyone'd be interested..." He raised his voice enough on the last part to carry to Draco and Hermione, who were almost to them by now.

"Tea sounds nice," said Hermione once she had her breath back.

"Weren't you supposed to be studying Charms tonight?" asked Draco slyly.

"I'll make up for it tomorrow," said Hermione loftily, following Hagrid inside his house.

It was probably a remnant of the Pack's days in hiding, Harry thought, that he felt comfortable and at home in Hagrid's hut, since it had always been one of their other dens. The rock cakes were as shapeless and tasteless as ever, and Fang was as willing to soak all their robes with slobber. By the time they said goodnight to Hagrid and headed back to the castle, Harry felt much better.

So Dursley's my cousin. Lucius Malfoy is Draco's father, and that doesn't matter to the Pack. Neither does this. It's just part of life. After all, what's he going to do? Try and blackmail me? I don't care who knows he's my cousin.

So there's nothing he can do to hurt me.

Nothing at all.

The cubs took to having tea with Hagrid every week. It was something to look forward to, as most of the school was still very irritated with them. Hermione had even stopped raising her hand in class, and as Draco said, “that would normally take a miracle.”

What with studying on top of homework and Quidditch practice (Wood had angrily refused Harry’s offer to resign from the team over his blunder, but the rest of the team wasn’t speaking to him), Harry was busier than ever, and it amazed him how fast the time went. Before he knew it, there were only two weeks left until exams, and he realized how little of what he needed to know he actually knew. Hermione’s study schedules suddenly became extremely precious to him, and he spent every extra minute in the library.

On Thursday of that week, the first year Defense Against the Dark Arts class, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, arrived in their classroom to find Professor Quirrell there instead of Professor Lockhart. “I’ll be t-t-teaching you t-today,” he said, nervously pulling out the roll sheet. “P-Professor L-Lockhart is ill.”

Harry left the classroom talking excitedly with the rest of the class, their grudge against him momentarily forgotten in the exhilaration of the first good Defense lesson they’d had at Hogwarts, so it wasn’t too surprising that he got halfway back to Gryffindor Tower before realizing that he’d left Year with the Yeti in the Defense classroom. He made plans to meet the rest of the Pack in the library and doubled back.

As he got closer to the Defense classroom, Harry heard a voice.

“M-me? Again? S-so soon?”

It was Quirrell, and he sounded terrified of whoever he was talking with – Harry couldn’t hear the other voice.

“P-please, no... not th-that...”

Harry strained his ears, but still could not hear the reply.

“Yes,” said Quirrell finally, his voice quivering horribly. “Yes, yes, all right...”

Harry nipped around a corner just in time as Quirrell came through the door, almost running, his face as pale as it had been that night in the hospital wing. Harry waited for him to get out of sight, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but there were other doors, one to the Defense teacher’s office and quarters – momentarily he wondered who used those, Quirrell or Lockhart – and one leading to another hallway. And the one leading to the hallway was ajar. Harry would have bet his broomstick that someone had just nipped out that door – and he had a cold feeling in his gut that told him who that someone might be.

His book was lying under his chair. He picked it up and beat a hasty retreat. He had a lot to talk to the rest of the Pack about...

“Me, again, so soon,” Hermione repeated. “What do you think Snape would want Quirrell to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry. “That’s why I’m asking you.”

“Again,” said Draco musingly. “What have they ever done together that they’d do ‘again’?”

“Don’t know.” Suddenly Harry remembered his thought of the moment in the classroom. “Who uses the Defense teacher’s quarters, do you know? Is it Quirrell or Lockhart?”

“Not sure,” said Ron. “I’ve never seen either of them going in anywhere else...”

“They both use them,” said Neville. “I heard Professor Lockhart say he agreed to move in with Professor Quirrell to save space.”

“Save space?” Ron looked astonished. “This is a castle! There’s loads of space!”

Harry gulped. A rather disgusting thought had just come to him. “Maybe there’s another reason,” he said.

“Another reason? What...” Ron caught sight of the look on Harry’s face. “Oh.”

“And that might be what Snape – if it was Snape – was talking about,” said Draco speculatively. “Maybe that’s what they’ve ‘done’ together...”

Madam Pince chased them all out of the library for making too much noise – the groans, false retching, and other sounds of incipient nausea were not only far too loud but highly inappropriate, she informed them sternly, and they were to do that sort of thing in a bathroom. She couldn’t understand why this made the five students turn even greener.

“I did not need that image in my head, thank you very much, Draco Regulus Black,” said Hermione, looking utterly revolted, as they walked back to Gryffindor Tower. “That’s just sick.”

For once, no one disagreed with one of Hermione’s pronouncements. (A/N: So, are we having fun yet?)

Check bio page some time tomorrow for review responses! They will be there, I promise, it just updates slowly! Random review topic for today... basements.

Note to Crydwyn: A few chapters ago, you sent me a link for a sketch. Unfortunately, this site doesn’t allow links to be posted in reviews. If you want to send it again, my e-mail is whydoyou21 (at) yahoo (dot) com. I’d love to see it.)

Chapter 15: Ready for Anything

Luna Lovegood was up early on the morning of her eleventh birthday. Not only was she expecting her Hogwarts letter today, but she was going to have a wonderful party. She, Ginny Weasley, and Meghan Black were going to spend the entire day together, and then have a sleepover as well. It would be a great deal of fun.

The only thing that would make it better, Luna thought, was if her other friends could have been there as well. But they were at Hogwarts and getting ready for their exams, so it wasn't to be expected that they could just take a day off and come to visit her. Besides, three of them were boys, and boys didn't come to girls' sleepovers, so it wouldn't have worked right. She would be there the next year, at any rate, and they could celebrate her birthday all together then.

At another house in the neighborhood, preparations for a party were also in order. A picnic basket was being packed, broomsticks were being carefully shrunk to pocket size, sturdy, comfortable clothing was being donned, and faces were being washed. Occasionally without their owner's consent.

"Hold still," commanded Aletha, wielding a wet washcloth. "You've got dirt all down your face – what have you been doing?"

"Were you planning on taking this somewhere, Meghan?" asked Remus before Meghan could answer her mother, coming into the music room holding a newly potted lavender plant.

"Ah-ha." Aletha gave a satisfied nod. "You were in the garden, weren't you?"

Meghan nodded, then submitted to her mother scrubbing her face for a moment. "It's for Luna," she said when she could speak again. "For a present."

"We have a present for you to give her, and you know it," said Remus in a mock-scolding tone. "But you wanted something of your own to give her, didn't you?"

“Yes.” Meghan drew herself up proudly. “It’s the polite thing to do.”

“You are quite correct,” said Remus contritely, exchanging a secret wink with Aletha. “Are you ready to go?”

“Here’s your sleeping bag,” said Sirius, coming in from the kitchen and pretending to toss the bedroll towards Meghan, who squealed and ducked. “And you’ve got your overnight bag all packed.”

“You’ve had it packed for a week,” said Danger from the kitchen, closing the picnic basket. “If I had to guess, I’d guess you’re excited about this party.”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes...”

“My daughter, the jumping bean,” said Sirius, catching Meghan at the top of one of her leaps. “Be good for Mr. Lovegood, all right, Pearl? We should be back by midnight, so try not to get homesick before that.”

“I won’t get homesick,” said Meghan with a hint of contempt in her voice.

“If you say so,” said Danger, holding out her arms and taking Meghan from Sirius. “Oof, you’re getting big.” She set the girl down and gave her a kiss and a scent-touch. “Have a good time, sweetheart.”

The rest of the Pack said their goodbyes as well, a flick of Remus’ fingers lit a fire in the fireplace, and Meghan was gone in a rush of green flames. Aletha Flooded behind her with all her things, “since put together they probably weigh more than she does”.

“You know, that’s kind of funny,” said Danger.

“What is?”

“Meghan. She’s so tiny. No one would expect that from looking at you and Aletha, Sirius. You’re neither of you small – you both played Beater, with all that implies. And your only child is this tiny little wisp.”

“You know what they say,” said Sirius. “What she lacks in brawn, she makes up for in brains.”

“Hmm.” Remus looked Sirius up and down. “Explains a lot about you.”

“Yeah, it does – hey!”

Danger rescued the picnic basket just in time, as Sirius didn’t bother to go around the kitchen table and instead went over it in dog form. Remus Disapparated hastily as Sirius launched himself at his friend, and Aletha Apparated into the music room just in time to see Sirius skid across the slick kitchen floor and crash into the cupboards beside the stove.

“That looked like it hurt,” said Remus from where he’d reappeared in the hallway.

Sirius turned human again and stood up. “Nope, didn’t hurt at all.”

“BS.”

“No kidding.”

“Are you two going to fight all day, or can we get this party under way?” asked Aletha with the slightest edge to her tone.

“Ready when you are, m’dear.” Sirius crossed the kitchen to her side, limping ever so slightly on one leg, and took her hand. Remus accepted the picnic basket from Danger, Aletha picked up the roll of picnic blanket, and Danger pocketed the family’s brooms. “Off to Hogsmeade, then.”

With a wave of loud cracks, the Pack Disapparated.

It was a gorgeous day, and they took full advantage. First was flying, over the same meadow they had always used for their outings – races, relays, timed obstacle courses, and showing off their tricks – even Danger had learned a few. When they were tired of that, they rested for a while and snacked on the food from the basket, before

setting off on a hike to the old Marauders' picnic cave, where they ate their lunch.

After lunch, they secured everything in the cave to keep it away from wild animals and came outside.

"Ladies and gentlemen," proclaimed Remus.

"Is there someone else here?" asked Sirius.

"Counting myself." Remus gave his friend an exasperated look. "A bit over a year ago, we embarked on a journey of self-discovery. A voyage to find, if you will, the animal within. Some of us had already begun this journey in our younger years. Some had never even known it was possible until already well beyond said younger years. But as of yesterday, we are all legally registered and licensed Animagi, and I would just like to say – last one to the Forest's a dead puffskein!" And a tawny lion was bounding down the mountainside path, making a sound as it ran that sounded suspiciously like a snicker.

"Hey, no fair!" Danger leapt to her feet, and a moment later, a wolf with a long tan coat dashed after the lion. Sirius wasted no time on shouting, opting to save his breath for running.

Aletha chuckled, watching her three closest friends pursue one another down the path. "I'd better let them have a head start," she said to no one in particular. "It wouldn't be fair, otherwise." You should have known I was up to something.

How?

From the way I was talking.

What, you mean incredibly pompous and formal?

Yes.

It didn't sound all that much different from the way you usually talk.

Ouch. I'm hurt.

Yes, yes, I feel your pain. But you're not hurting nearly as much as you will be when I beat you to the Forest! Danger speeded up and, feeling daring, broke her stride for a moment to smack one of Remus' back paws with her own front one.

The lion growled and increased his own pace. In your dreams, little girl.

They bypassed Hogsmeade entirely – it might be a wizarding village, but there were some things even wizards weren't used to, and a lion running free in England was one of them. Likewise, they weren't heading for the gates into Hogwarts, but rather for the back way in. As they approached the border of the Forest, which defined the boundary of Hogwarts' grounds in at least one direction, something stirred in the trees.

What's that?

Don't know. Be on your guard, some of the things that live in this forest are dangerous...

A great black horse, wings folded against its sides, emerged from the edge of the trees and regarded them all calmly as they came running up, Remus still in the lead, Danger and Sirius neck and neck behind him.

That doesn't look too dangerous.

Well, not unless you get between her and her piano... or her cauldron...

Or her daughter?

That too.

They retransformed almost as one.

"Took you long enough," said Aletha, looking quite satisfied.

Sirius groaned. "Wings. I forgot."

"How's the flying?" asked Danger interestedly.

"Easier than I thought it would be. It seems pretty instinctive – I just had one panic moment when I lost the thermal I was using for lift and went into a pretty steep dive before I could recover."

"Maybe you can give Ron and Luna tips."

"Ron and Luna?" Remus looked at Danger oddly.

"Our two bird Animagi – hawk and owl, if you recall."

"And what gives you the idea they'll be learning to become Animagi at any point in the near future?"

"The fact that we've promised to teach the cubs, and the fact that the only secret the cubs ever successfully kept from their friends was our identities – and that only because they knew what might happen to us if they spilled. Something like Animagus training? Not a chance."

Sirius chortled. "Molly Weasley may never forgive us. First me, then you, Moony, and now we're planning to turn her two youngest children into illegal Animagi."

"We're preventing them from doing it on their own, like you and James and Peter did in school," said Aletha. "That was so incredibly dangerous and stupid – how you managed it without killing yourselves I'll never know. How in the world did Peter ever survive it? He could barely manage to hold his wand straight some days."

The reminiscing was fairly begun. It lasted at least four hours, not counting time out for running, wrestling, and trial flights as the Pack tested out their new forms. Aletha tested her weight tolerance and discovered that she could even fly with Sirius on her back.

"Must be magic," she said after retransforming. "I certainly can't lift you in human form."

Danger straddled Remus' back at one point in order to scratch his spine better, and Remus, in a playful mood, stood up under her, making her squeal and clutch at his mane in order to stay on. Aletha and Sirius laughed as Remus trotted around the clearing with his passenger holding on for dear life and alternately shouting at them and him. "Put me down – it's not funny – put me down right now – quit laughing – Remus! Put me down!"

As you wish. Remus stopped abruptly, lay down, and rolled over, forcing Danger to transform and leap clear. Now scratch my belly.

I wish I had claws like yours, then I'd scratch you all right, Danger groused.

But she did.

And I might like to try that again some time, she said a while later. Just with some warning, next time.

Life doesn't give you much warning, love. You've got to learn to be ready.

Ready for what? An impromptu lion-ride?

Maybe. Remus retransformed and took advantage of Danger's surprise to pull her down on top of himself, bringing her face to his. You have to be ready for anything.

Well, I'm always ready for this...

Aletha and Sirius vacated the clearing rather hastily and returned some time later with the picnic basket and blankets.

Is it just me, or did they take a bit longer about retrieving this than they had to?

Well, it wouldn't be the first time the cave's been used for that. I know James took Lily up there once or twice... and we can't be the first bunch to use it, it's too convenient to Hogsmeade.

Convenient? It's a fifteen-minute walk, uphill all the way!

Yes, but it's private, large enough for a good-sized group of people – Aletha could walk into there in Animagus form without bending her head – and it has a great view.

Good point. Points.

"Are you two going to keep that up all night, or would you eventually like some dinner?" asked Aletha, setting out the plates.

"We're coming, hold your horses – though that might be harder for some of us than for others..."

Aletha threw a roll at Danger, who transformed and caught it in her mouth. Two snaps, a gulp, and she was human again. "Tastes funny," she said, shaking her head. "Wolf prefers meat. I'll stick to human for eating, I think, unless there's some reason not to."

Remus reported a similar reaction when he tried some bread in lion form. Sirius looked confused. "I don't understand. Everything tastes about the same to me in dog shape."

"You have an appetite like a garbage disposal," said Aletha tartly. "Everything always tastes the same to you."

"That's not true! And what's a garbage disposal, anyway?"

"Man's been living like a Muggle for ten years and still doesn't know basic terminology," said Danger, casting her eyes up to heaven. "I ask you..."

"Oh, you mean that thing in the sink that sounds like a yeti clearing its throat?"

"Having never been privileged enough to hear that, I would nonetheless assume that is an accurate enough description."

"Uh-oh, she's mad. She's using long words."

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, there's only one thing that irks me more than your stupidity, Sirius Black, and that's your habit of talking about people as if they aren't there!" Danger changed forms and leapt at Sirius, who transformed as well and rolled out of the way. A wolf-dog fight ensued, neither party incredibly serious about it, but neither willing to give up first, so that no blood was shed, but several painful nips were administered on both sides.

"I would guess this is what we looked like," said Remus to Aletha as they watched. "Sirius and I. Back in Hogwarts days. Now if you can just picture a stag standing over there, with a little rat somewhere around..."

Aletha regarded him for a moment. "You still miss him, don't you?"

"Him who?"

"James. Is there another 'him' you thought I might be talking about?"

Remus sighed. "Letha, you knew Peter. Would you ever have believed he was a spy? A Death Eater?"

"Probably not. He just seemed like such a harmless little person... and that was what made him so perfect, wasn't it. Everyone just looked right past him."

"Yes. But I hardly have any memories from Hogwarts that don't have him in them, and he was truly our friend then. I'm sure of it. But then, I was sure of it up until the day James and Lily died. So I'm not sure what to think any more." Remus slid his hands back and forth along the picnic blanket, alternating forward and back.

"In some ways, he was a casualty of the war," said Aletha quietly. "You might even consider him the most tragic of the four of you. James died, yes, but he died like a man and a hero, defending his wife and his son. And you and Sirius have suffered, but look at you now. Peter made a mistake and started down a path he probably didn't feel he could change, and it led him to betray his friends, live for nine years as a rat, and end up in Azkaban."

“The Greek tragic hero – except for one problem. A tragic hero has to start as a great man, and Peter Pettigrew was never anyone’s definition of a great man.” Remus gave her a one-sided grin. “He was about as far from great as it’s possible to get.”

“So he never had anything, really. Tell the truth, you three weren’t often very polite to him, were you?”

Remus shook his head. “He was something of a tag-along. We tolerated him – sometimes not even that – but it was more than he got from anyone else, and as long as he was around us the only bullying he had to put up with was from James and Sirius, so...” He exhaled slowly. “I suppose he thought, better the devils he knew than the ones he didn’t.”

“I would imagine the Death Eaters promised him respect and power if he would just tell them a few, unimportant things. And then, little by little, unimportant things became more and more important, and before he knew it he was in too deeply to back out. They might have threatened him as well – but it doesn’t matter now, does it.” Aletha rolled over and looked up at the sky, which was still blue, with the first hints of sunset color in the west. “I don’t even know why I want to know. I guess I’m just curious.”

“A bit misplaced, isn’t it? It was the cat curiosity killed, not the horse.”

“True – I’m the one you can lead to water, but you can’t make me drink.”

“There’s a stream somewhere around here, if I’m not mistaken – want to test that?”

“No thank you. Not unless you want to test out the one about curiosity.”

“As I recall, there’s a second part to that one. Curiosity killed the cat – but satisfaction brought it back to life.”

“Well, as I have no intention of satisfying you, you’d just have to remain dead...”

“Who’s dead?” asked Sirius, flopping down on the blanket across from them.

By the time the conversation had been recapped, explained, digressed upon, and discussed to everyone’s liking, the sun was all the way down, the stars were coming out, and dinner was a few scraps and a pleasant memory.

“One thing you’ll really like about Animagus forms,” said Sirius, packing away the dishes in the basket. “They usually have much better night sight than humans do. Letha, I don’t know how yours will be, but Remus, Danger, you ought to see better in the dark than you usually do.”

Better was an understatement. Danger preferred her human eyes in the daylight, since they could see colors the wolf couldn’t, but at night, even without much of a moon, everything was incredibly sharper to her wolf’s eyes, and she had improved hearing and a wonderfully improved sense of smell to make up for anything her eyes might miss.

Centaurs were through here not too long ago. And something big and insectoid, but that’s at least three nights gone. And...

What’s wrong?

Danger jumped and lost the scent. Nothing. Just thought I smelled blood.

There’s other predators in this forest. You probably just scented someone’s dinner.

Probably.

But something about the scent had made Danger uneasy.

The great black dog paced up beside her. Want to go hunting? it suggested in animal-speech.

Danger let her mouth hang open in a predator's grin. Hunting. Yes. Good.

Lion, wolf, and dog vanished into the Forest and the night.

"What on earth are we supposed to do at this hour of the night?" asked Hermione for the fourth time as she, Harry, Draco, and Neville made their way down to the entrance hall, where the notes they'd received that morning had told them to be at eleven o'clock.

"And with Filch," said Harry. "I don't like it."

"You know they're not going to make us do anything dangerous," said Draco practically. "They wouldn't. Probably have us scrub out the Great Hall or something now that everyone's gone to bed."

"Whatever they have us do, it's better than what Gran did to me," said Neville fatalistically.

Harry didn't blame him. Neville's grandmother had kept him under what amounted to house arrest all through the Easter holidays as punishment for his getting detention. Punishment for getting punished seemed a bit over-the-top to Harry, but he hadn't said so, since it wasn't polite to criticize.

"Come along, you're late," said Filch nastily as they descended the marble staircase. He was holding a lit lantern, and Harry's confusion mounted. Were they going outdoors?

It would seem they were. Filch led them out the front doors and across the lawn, talking all the time about the old punishments, how grand they'd been. Harry couldn't see anything grand about hanging from the ceiling by one's wrists. Neville looked scared, Hermione and Draco a bit bored – they'd heard Filch's rants before, when they were smaller and would come to visit Hogwarts to see their Pack-friends there.

Speaking of Pack-friends...

“Abou’ time yeh showed up, Filch,” growled a voice from the darkness, and Hagrid’s huge figure came into the circle of light shed by Filch’s lantern. “I’ve bin waitin’.”

“Here they are, then,” said Filch, allowing Hagrid to light the two lamps he was carrying from Filch’s own.

“All right there, you three?” Hagrid greeted the cubs. Harry nodded as Draco and Hermione made a fuss over Fang.

“Don’t get too friendly with them, you great oaf,” snapped Filch. “This is supposed to be a punishment, not a tea party. I’ll be back in the morning for any of them who come back.” He turned and headed back to the castle.

“Come back?” repeated Neville, his voice shaking.

“Ah, don’t pay him no mind,” said Hagrid in disgust. “We’re goin’ out to the Forest, that’s all, ter check on a hurt unicorn.”

This did not seem to reassure Neville much. “But – there’s things in the Forest! Monsters and vampires and werewolves!”

“Werewolves aren’t likely to be a problem,” said Hermione. “Even if there were any, it’s not full moon, so they’d be as human as we are.”

Draco nodded. “And you can usually bargain with a vampire. Offer to give him some blood if he’ll promise not to kill you.”

“An’ Fang an’ I can protect yeh from anything that lives in the Forest,” said Hagrid firmly. “So come on, the sooner we start the sooner we’re done.”

“How did a unicorn get hurt?” asked Harry as they made their way towards the border of the Forest.

“Don’t know. That’s the problem. Unicorns are powerful magical creatures, they are, and fast. Hard ter catch, harder ter hurt. And this’s the second one – found one dead a week’r so ago.”

They followed a narrow, winding path into the Forest. The light from Hagrid's lantern and the one he'd given Hermione to carry seemed to stop a little shorter than they should have, and Harry felt a touch claustrophobic, hemmed in by the trees. Twice he felt a prickle on the back of his neck, as if someone were watching him from the trees – or as if the trees themselves were watching him...

"There's blood all over here," said Hagrid, pointing out puddles of a silvery liquid which dotted the path. "Poor beast must've been stumblin' around since last night at least."

"Do you think it's dead?" asked Hermione.

"If not, we'll have ter end its misery," said Hagrid grimly. "Now the path forks a little way down, I want us ter split up – Harry, Draco, yeh'll go with Fang, an' I'll take Hermione an' Neville. Yeh all know how to send up sparks from yer wands? Green if yeh find the unicorn – go on, do some now – that's good – and red if yer in trouble and need help – let's see 'em – all right, everyone be careful, an' keep ter the path – let's go."

Harry accepted the lantern Hagrid handed him and started off down the left-hand fork of the path with Draco beside him and Fang at their heels.

"Didn't Hagrid say once that Fang's a coward?" asked Draco after they'd walked in silence a few moments.

"Yeah."

"All right. Just wanted to make sure."

They kept walking. There was still plenty of the silver-blue unicorn blood to be seen, but Hagrid had said it was all over this part of the Forest, Harry thought – it didn't necessarily mean anything...

"You scared?" he asked.

"No. You?"

“No.”

A few more minutes.

“Really?”

“No.”

“Thought not.”

A few more minutes.

“Shh!”

“What?”

“Thought I heard something.” Harry handed Draco the lantern and squinted into the undergrowth. “Can you shield that?”

Draco pulled off his cloak and wrapped the lantern in it. Fang whined. “Shut up,” Harry said to him, and shut his eyes to start accustoming them to the darkness, and to listen better...

A sort of slithering sound, like the hem of somebody’s robes rustling across fallen leaves, and words... words that he could understand if he could just listen harder... if he were just a step closer... just another step... another... another...

A hand caught his wrist.

Harry pulled himself free and spun on his attacker, taking a fighting stance.

Draco backed away, hands up in a “no threat” position. “You were walking off the path,” he said. “Hagrid said stay on.”

“I know.” The sound was gone. “I know.”

“What did you hear?”

Harry looked back in the direction the sound had been – or perhaps the direction he'd imagined the sound was in. "Nothing."

Draco unwrapped the lantern, and they walked on. It was getting harder to follow the path, the trees grew so thickly here, and –

"Is there more blood around here than there was back there?"

"I was just about to ask you that."

"So it's not my imagination."

"I don't think so."

They walked a few minutes more. Harry found his hand drifting toward his wand, and after the fourth time in as many minutes, finally just pulled it out. "Lumos," he said, and was rewarded with a beam of light – not as strong or as bright as he'd seen the Pack-parents produce, but enough to show him the way. Draco drew and lit his own wand as well, and blew out the lantern.

They rounded a bend in the trail and froze. The unicorn lay before them, dead. It was beautiful in a terrible kind of way. Its mane and tail shone in the moonlight, as did the pools of blood on the leaves around it and on its fur where a terrible wound gleamed wetly. Fang whimpered and backed away.

Danger, slowly moving forward on a stalk of an unsuspecting rabbit, froze suddenly.

Something's wrong.

Harry raised his wand, preparing to send up green sparks, when a rustling sound caught his ear again – and from the look on Draco's face, he'd heard it too.

Suddenly Draco's hand shot out, pointing – bushes on the other side of the clearing were shaking...

Help me – it's happening again – like at the Quidditch match!

Turn back – this is easier to handle in human form – Remus erupted from his hiding place, scaring their erstwhile prey into flight, and

turned human in midstride, almost falling over his own feet in his hurry to get to Danger's side. We'll take it one step at a time – like we did then –

Danger shuddered, clinging to her magic with all she had. We may not have time.

Remus swore aloud as his pendant turned cold.
Harry stared. Something was coming out of the bushes.

A figure cloaked and hooded, so it must be human or something like a human, but it wasn't walking upright – it was crawling...
Neville jumped as Hermione gasped. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's in trouble!" She pulled at her robes, bringing out the gold medallions Neville had noticed all the Pack-children wore, and gave a little moan of fear. "Harry and Draco! Something's wrong – they're going to die!"

"Do yeh know where they are?" Hagrid demanded.

Hermione shook her head, visibly fighting tears.

Hagrid cursed under his breath. "Could be almost anywhere by now..."

Harry watched in horrified fascination as the thing crept up to the unicorn, as if afraid it might still be alive... now it was putting its head down to the unicorn's side –

And drinking the blood...

Use this to tell us where they are! Give it a direction – something to do!

Danger closed her eyes – wolf, human, she couldn't tell – and found herself at the center of a firestorm, a whirlwind, of raw power – it wanted to kill, it wanted to tear, it wanted to burn all in its path –

NO! You will hear me and do as I say – not the other way around!

The power seemed amused – if a thing could have emotions – at the thought of her, such a puny human, controlling it – it seemed harder this time, Danger thought faintly –

Tell us where they are. We can do nothing if we do not know.

An image crashed into her mind – as quickly as she could, she threw it outwards toward Remus, dimly aware of other minds in the linkage – he must have linked up with Sirius and Aletha –
Thank God, they're close – that way – go, we'll catch up with you –

The Blacks needed no second invitation.

Draco made a sound as if he wanted to scream and couldn't – all he could manage was a whimpering moan – but it broke the trance they were all held in. Fang bolted back down the path, howling, and Harry grabbed Draco's wrist and turned to run.

Draco tripped over a tree root and they both went down hard. Harry got himself disentangled from his brother, rolled over, and felt his blood turn to ice. The thing had noticed them, it was looking straight at them, drips of silvery unicorn blood were running down its front, it was starting to get up –

Harry screamed – he'd never felt pain like this before. There was a red-hot line searing down the front of his head, threatening to break it in two – he couldn't move, he couldn't see –

He heard the sound of galloping hooves behind him.

Draco knew he should be on his feet, should be fighting whatever this was that had Harry incapacitated, but he literally could not move – fear had him paralyzed –

A huge black shape sailed over his head and landed in the clearing. It was a horse – but a horse with wings – and it reared onto its hind legs and screamed in fury, striking at the hooded figure with front hooves and wings – a snarl caught his ear, and a huge, bear-like dog charged into the fray – the figure, dodging the horse's attack, was caught by surprise, and the dog got its teeth into the thing's robes, but tore only cloth away –

The figure hissed and gestured, and the dog was lifted off its feet and thrown across the clearing into a tree. It yelped in pain and tried to get up – the horse screamed again and leapt out of the way of a similar strike –

Harry heard the sounds of the battle distantly, through a haze of pain, the horse's scream, the dog's snarl –

"You dare to interfere?" he thought he heard someone shout. "I will destroy you!" The dog yelped, the horse screamed again –

Then came the sound that overwhelmed even the pain in his head – it seemed to shake the entire Forest –

Somewhere very nearby, a lion roared.
Neville's heart was pounding. "What's that?"

"Sounded like a lion," said Hagrid, adding puzzlement to the worry already on his face. "But there's no lions in the Forest – leastways, there shouldn't be..."

"Follow it!" cried Hermione. "Follow it – it's Moony!"

"Come on!" shouted Hagrid, and they were running crazily through the Forest, off the path, Hagrid in the lead, Hermione next, Neville last, trying not to think of all the stories he'd ever heard where things picked off whoever was last in the line...

Remus roared again and leapt down into the clearing, striking at the hooded figure with his claws, making contact once, low down, before it turned and ran – although it wasn't quite running – it moved too smoothly for running, there were no steps or footfalls...

Never mind.

He crossed the clearing in two bounds and turned human again at Sirius' side. His friend was dazed but looked otherwise all right. "What the hell was that?"

"Good question," said Remus, helping Sirius up.

“And I’ll ask another one – what the hell are they doing out here in the middle of the night?” Sirius looked at Harry and Draco, Harry lying curled up on the ground with his face hidden in his hands, Draco unabashedly clinging to Aletha with his face buried in her shoulder.

“You see if you can find out. I need to get back to Danger. If whatever that was finds her, she’s in no shape to defend herself. Meet you at the castle?”

“It’s a date.”

Remus turned lion again and loped out of the clearing. Sirius steadied himself on the tree trunk for a moment before crossing to his wife and Pack-sons. He knelt down beside Aletha and slid two fingers along Harry’s neck, feeling the strong pulse – he’s alive. Good.

Harry shivered at his touch. “Cold,” he complained.

“Sorry,” said Sirius, removing his hand. Even still conscious – what happened to him, I wonder?

He moved around behind Harry, sat cross-legged, and began to rub the boy’s shoulders, feeling how knotted the muscles were – something scared him badly, he’s as tense as a fifth year before O.W.L.s. After a few moments, Harry began to uncurl, and after a rather confused moment of blurred motion, Sirius discovered himself in possession of a lapful of shaking eleven-year-old boy, face pressed against his shoulder.

“What’s ‘disintegrate’ mean?” asked Harry after about a minute had passed, lifting his head to look Sirius in the eye.

Sirius chuckled, taken by surprise. “Harry, of all the questions to ask in the middle of the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night... it means to come apart completely. Why do you want to know?”

“He shouted it out. ‘You dare to interfere? I will destroy you! Disintegrate your bodies and send your souls shrieking into the night!’ Then Moony showed up and he ran off.”

Sirius frowned. "I didn't hear it say anything."

"Maybe it was my imagination, then." Harry rubbed at his forehead.

"What's the matter?"

"Head still hurts. Can we go back to the castle soon?"

"Yes, of course – what were you even doing out here?"

"Detention," answered Draco, turning half around. "This's what we had to do for detention."

"Without anyone around?"

"We were with Hagrid–"

The sound of something very large crashing through the undergrowth startled everyone. Draco's eyes widened and Harry shivered a little harder.

"Whatever it is, it's carrying a light," said Aletha, pointing to a faint radiance in the direction of the noise. She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Hello there!"

"Who's that?" The answering bellow could not be mistaken.

"Friends, Hagrid," Aletha shouted back. "We've got Harry and Draco, they're all right. Will you be all right if I go talk to him?" she asked Draco, who nodded. She helped him sit down, then made her way towards the edge of the clearing where they were likely to appear.

"Something wrong with you, fox?" asked Sirius.

"Twisted my ankle on a tree root, that's all." Draco scooted over and sat with his back against Sirius' side. "Since Harry took the good seat."

Harry reached over and pulled a hank of Draco's hair. Draco flicked Harry's glasses out of place.

They can still fight. They'll be fine.

But I'm going to take apart whoever decided it was a good idea to send first years into a Forest with something running around that could kill unicorns.

Remus walked out of the Forest, Danger on a stretcher beside him, unconscious.

She seems to spend a lot of time this way.

They had been able to get the magic under control in fairly short order – a similar visualization to the last time had worked – but he could feel that Danger had been closer to losing control this time.

And there's always a possibility this will hit when I'm not around...

Borrowing trouble again, Remus. Focus on what went right. She's alive, so is everyone else, and the boys are going to be all right... I hope...

Wingbeats above him caught his attention. He lowered the stretcher to the ground and changed forms for a moment.

A jet-black winged horse flew towards the castle. It – she – was difficult for even the lion to see, and would have been almost invisible to a human, as would the two boys on her back. Relief filled him at the sight.

He changed back, levitated the stretcher again, and watched the winged mare – a night mare? he wondered whimsically – land on the broad top step and bend her knees, allowing her passengers to debark. Draco was favoring his left ankle, Remus noticed with a stab of worry, and Harry didn't look very steady on his feet. Aletha quickly retransformed as soon as both boys were down and steadied them both in through the door.

Remus mounted the steps and followed them into the entrance hall. "All right, boys?" he asked as soon as he was inside.

“Just my ankle,” said Draco, sitting down on the pedestal of a nearby statue.

“Fine.” Harry was very pale and leaning against Aletha. “Moony, did you hear anything back there? When you were fighting that – thing?”

“Anything, like what?”

“Like words. Did you hear it say anything?”

“No, I didn’t. Why?”

“Because I did. Things like ‘I will destroy you’.”

“All I heard it do was a kind of hissing sound,” said Draco.

“Hissing sound?” said Remus, a sudden thought freezing him where he stood. “Like a snake?”

“Yeah, like a snake...” Draco trailed off. “Like a snake.”

“Like Parseltongue,” said Aletha. “Which you understand, Greeneyes, and we don’t. So you would have heard words, and we only hissing.”

“But – that wasn’t a snake. It wore clothes, it had feet and hands...” Harry looked confused.

“So,” said Remus, hating the conclusion he was about to make. “If it wasn’t a snake, but it spoke Parseltongue, there’s only one thing it could have been.”

“A Parselmouth,” said Harry slowly. “But the only other Parselmouth around is...”

Remus nodded grimly. “Exactly.”

There was a long silence.

(A/N: Good? Bad? Let me know! Review! Random topic for today... screwdrivers. Review responses tomorrow, I have things I have to do...

For everyone who asked: The Noodle Incident is a nod to the greatest comic strip of all time, Calvin and Hobbes. It only ran for eleven years, but every strip from those eleven years is good. Some are fantastic. And like Bill Watterson, the creator of C&H, I will not be elaborating on the Noodle Incident... you will! Announcing my first ever challenge: write the story of the Great Hogwarts Noodle Incident! See Yahoo group for details – again, tomorrow – sorry!)

Chapter 16: Decision

"You saw You-Know-Who?" said Ron in astonishment. "But – I thought he was supposed to be dead!"

"I guess not," said Harry bleakly. "Not if he's running around the Forbidden Forest drinking unicorn blood."

Ron made a face. "That's sick. Why would he want to do that?"

"Unicorn blood is very powerful," explained Hermione. "It'll keep you alive even if you're just about to die, but it puts a curse on your life forever."

"He's probably after the – you-know-what," said Harry. "On the third floor. If he gets that, it'll mean he can never die."

"As long as he's got it," said Hermione. "You have to keep drinking the stuff, it wears off after a while. But the... you-know-what... can always make more – that's part of why it's so magical."

The portrait hole opened and Draco climbed through. "Better?" Hermione asked him.

"Good as new."

"How's Neville?" asked Ron.

"He's fine, he just had a couple of cuts from branches and things, but Madam Pomfrey insisted on treating him, and he was so tired from running all that way that he fell asleep as soon as he got on the bed, so he's spending the night there. And Moony said, quote, 'Go to bed and that's an order, you can talk it to death in the morning.'"

The four looked at each other.

"Right," said Harry after a moment, and went over to the wall by the fireplace. "Thank you, Godric."

He said go to bed. He didn't say where.

“Chocolate Frog,” said Aletha to a certain gargoyle, which politely leapt out of her way. She stepped onto the slowly turning spiral staircase behind it, Sirius only a step behind her, Remus behind him. At the top, she knocked at the wooden door, hearing the conversation within cease as she did.

“Come in,” called Dumbledore’s voice, and Aletha pushed the door open. “Aletha, Sirius, Remus, what an unexpected pleasure.”

“I hope we’re not keeping you from your bed,” said Aletha. An unexpected pleasure, is it? Then why don’t you look surprised to see us?

“I don’t care if we are,” said Sirius angrily. “What the hell were you thinking, sending first years into a Forest with something running around that dropped two unicorns?”

Dumbledore looked quietly grieved. “The second one is dead, then.”

“Yes, it’s dead,” confirmed Remus. “Harry and Draco found it. And they also found something else. Or should I say, someone.” He looked Dumbledore in the eye. “Voldemort’s back. He was in the Forest. Using unicorn blood to stay alive.”

Dumbledore stood still for a moment, his eyes introspective. “This is foul news indeed,” he said softly. “Fouler than you know.”

“Enlighten us, then,” said Sirius, still with traces of a dog-like snarl in his voice.

“We have no way of knowing precisely what happened when the Killing Curse rebounded from Harry and struck Lord Voldemort,” began Dumbledore, returning to his seat behind his desk and motioning the Marauders to chairs as well. “Many people believe Voldemort was killed that night. In light of what you claim, this cannot be true, and I have long discounted it for other reasons. Nor do I believe he was merely weakened by it. Instead, after study, I have determined that the most likely outcome was that Voldemort’s spirit – his soul – survived, but was torn from his body, which was destroyed by the Curse.”

Sirius shook his head. "That can't be right. He has a body – I almost got my teeth into it tonight."

"And if he has no body, how could the unicorn blood do him any good?" asked Aletha. "Something's not right here."

"Possession," said Remus quietly. "He's using someone else's body."

"So I believe." Dumbledore steepled his fingers. "But this conclusion, in turn, brings up a host of other questions. Is the possession willing or unwilling? How was it accomplished? And, of course, the ultimate question."

Sirius nodded grimly. "Who is it, you mean."

"Indeed." Dumbledore looked unusually somber. "Indeed."

Harry yawned and stretched, carefully edging his arm out from under Hermione. Ron, beside her, was sprawled across more of the mattress-like floor than seemed physically possible, snoring lustily. On Harry's other side lay Draco, curled up on his side as usual, breathing peacefully.

Harry thought back to the night before, when Draco had taken him aside, into the red bedroom, to tell him something...

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I didn't help you. I should have fought. But I was too afraid." Draco's face was set, and Harry knew it must be costing him to admit this. He took a breath as if to say something else, then changed his mind and dropped to one knee instead, tilting his head back.

Punish me if you think it right, he was saying silently. You are my leader. Do what you want with me.

"No," said Harry, and stepped closer to put his hand on the back of Draco's neck, the place of approval, not of punishment. "You didn't do anything wrong. Anyone would have been scared. I was scared." He

held Draco's eyes with his own, willing his brother to see that he meant what he was saying. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Draco bowed his head, accepting his alpha's judgment, and they stayed that way for one long moment. Then they returned to the main room, to Ron and Hermione, to talk, and, eventually, to sleep. I was scared. But I think I would have been more scared if I hadn't been hurting so much...

Harry looked at his watch. Good thing it's Saturday. We'd be late for class otherwise.

As it is...

He got up and went into the kitchen. Now's my chance.

He turned the knob on one of the burners on the range and was immediately rewarded with a steady flame.

Nice. Don't even have to wait for it to light.

He shut it off and started poking around the cupboards. There was plenty of cookware – pots, pans, and a full set of knives, which were quite sharp, Harry discovered, testing them as Danger had taught him, rubbing his thumb across the blade crosswise and noticing the tiny pile of skin shavings that accumulated. There were mixing bowls and wooden spoons, a rolling pin and a cutting board, even an iron kettle, and he noticed for the first time that a small fireplace was built into the wall beside the stove, and that a hob hung above it.

You could make just about anything in here. If you had ingredients.

That was what was missing from the kitchen. There was no food anywhere.

Of course not. You don't leave food in a place you're not coming back to. And it has to have been a while since people used this place last...

Harry left the kitchen, skirted around his still-sleeping Pack, and went almost directly across the room to the door of the green bedroom. "Al?" he said when he'd shut the door behind him. "You around?"

"Where else would I be?" asked Al, sticking his head into his frame. "What's on your mind?"

"Who used this place before we did?"

"Oh, various and sundry, different types." Al came all the way into the frame and leaned on it. "No one interesting, really. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering how long it's been since someone last used this place." Harry sat down on the bed. "It looks really clean – it always looks really clean – but there's nothing in the bathroom – nothing personal, I mean, there's supplies in there, toilet paper and stuff like that, but no toothbrushes or anything." He looked around the bedroom, realizing something. "There's nothing in any of the bedrooms, either. Or the kitchen."

"What were you expecting?"

"Well, there's usually food in a kitchen somewhere."

Al gave a lopsided grin. "Touché."

"What?"

"French for 'you got me'. You're right – there usually is food in a kitchen – but the house-elves know about this place, and they cleaned it out when the last person from the last group to use it died."

"Died? Then it has been a while."

"Between you and me, it certainly has. I was getting pretty lonely under there." Al waved at the bed. "Couldn't even get to anyone else's portrait to visit, since I wasn't on a wall. Thanks for doing that, by the way."

"You're welcome."

“So, to answer the question you’re probably about to ask – the fireplace in the kitchen has a one-way Floo connection down to the Hogwarts kitchens. You can Floo there from here, but not the other way around.”

Harry frowned. “That’s pretty stupid – what if someone needed to get here in a hurry?”

“Oh, they’d figure something out,” said Al lightly. “At any rate, if you want some food, just stick your head in the fire and tell the house-elves what you need. They’ll be only too happy to bring it up – and one of the cupboards has a fresh-keeping charm on it for leftovers and perishable stuff, eggs and milk and such. You can’t miss it, it’s the one that feels cold inside.”

“Thanks.” Harry got to his feet and was halfway out the door before he remembered. “Al?”

“Hmm?”

“Danger said to say she says hi back.”

Al looked puzzled for a moment. “She said to say she says... have you ever considered a career as a tongue-twister writer?”

“Rubber baby buggy bumpers,” said Harry promptly.

“She sells seashells by the seashore,” Al countered. “And do your parents know you’re cooking?”

“Who said I was cooking? I’ll ask the house-elves to bring us up some breakfast.”

Al rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Just don’t overtax the safety charms – they can’t keep you from burning yourself forever.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Harry closed the door behind himself.

“Were you in the Den?” asked Neville under his breath when the still-pajamaed foursome arrived in the common room nearly an hour later.

“Mm-hmm.” Draco looked around at the common room, which at the moment looked and sounded something like a shaken beehive. “What’s going on?”

“Hagrid didn’t show up to breakfast, and he’s not in his house. The teachers are all out looking for him.”

“Let’s get dressed,” said Harry, swallowing hard on a feeling of worry. “See you in a minute, Neville.”

“Oh, I hope he’s all right,” said Hermione anxiously.

“Me too.” Draco went up the stairs two at a time. Ron followed just as quickly. Harry lagged behind a little, trying not to think of Hagrid lost in the Forest –

But that was ridiculous. Hagrid practically lived in the Forest, he knew it better than anyone. There was no way he could have gotten lost there. So if he hadn’t showed up to breakfast, and he wasn’t in his house...

This isn’t helping.

Because the only reason Hagrid wouldn’t have come back was if he couldn’t. If he was hurt.

Or worse than hurt. The image of the dead unicorn kept flashing through Harry’s mind, and the thing that had drunk its blood... the thing which must have been Voldemort...

And he’s after the Sorcerer’s Stone...

Harry recalled what Moony had told him. “A series of enchantments and magical safeguards have been placed on it. I helped with the safeguarding – the whole Pack did...”

Dumbledore trusts the Pack. Like he trusts Hagrid.

What if Hagrid knew something about how to get past one of the safeguards on the Stone?

But Hagrid's not even a full wizard. What would he have been able to do to safeguard...

Harry cursed under his breath.

"What's wrong?" asked Ron, who was tying his shoes.

"That three-headed dog," said Harry furiously, yanking on his robes. "We should have known."

"Should have known what?" asked Draco from behind him.

"What d'you want to bet it belongs to Hagrid?"

Ron dropped his shoelaces. "You think You-Know-Who tried to get Hagrid to tell him how to get past it?"

Harry nodded. At that moment, there was a commotion in the common room. Draco leapt off his bed and yanked the door open, Harry and Ron right behind him. They piled out onto the staircase. Halfway down, Ron tripped, fell onto Harry and Draco, and the three of them tumbled all the rest of the way down the stairs.

Hermione ran over to them. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Shoe came untied," grunted Ron. "Gerroff me, Drake."

"I can't, Harry's sitting on my foot."

Harry removed his leg from under Ron's arm and accepted Hermione's hand to help him stand up. "We're fine, Hermione. What's everyone yelling about?"

Hermione's face broke into a huge smile. "Hagrid's going to be all right."

"He is?"

“What happened?”

“Where was he?”

“He was in the Forest,” said Hermione, answering the last question first. “Professor Lockhart found him and helped him get back to the castle. He has a concussion and a lot of scrapes, but Professor McGonagall says Madam Pomfrey says he’ll be all right.”

“Does he know what happened to him?” asked Draco.

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t know.”

The portrait opened, admitting Moony, who looked around for a moment before spotting them near the base of the stairs. He made his way carefully through the crowd to them. “You’ve heard, then?”

“Hagrid’s all right?” asked Harry, wanting to be sure.

“Yes. But the Forest is now even more off-limits than usual. Ditto for a certain corridor on the third floor. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

The cubs nodded. “Was it... You-Know-Who?” asked Hermione, opting for caution in the crowded common room. “Who attacked him?”

“We’re not sure. It seems likely, though. Harry, you’re to be especially careful. Don’t go anywhere alone – not that you ever do, but even if you go back for something you dropped, one of you three – you four,” Moony corrected himself as Neville finally made it through the crowd to join them, “go with him. Don’t make it too obvious, but try to stay together as much as possible.”

“What about Quidditch practice?” asked Harry, feeling a sudden surge of panic. “There isn’t a reserve Seeker – if I can’t play—”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” said Moony soothingly. “A day or two of practice might be cancelled while they search the grounds, but the truth is, he’s not likely to have lingered here – there’s too much good magic

settled in this castle for him to be really comfortable anywhere near it.”

Harry would have been more comforted by this if he hadn't had the distinct impression that Moony was trying to convince himself of its truth.

“What do you mean, I don't need to know? I don't need to know why he sent my cubs into danger? Why the hell not?”

“Believe it or not, Sirius, you're not the most important person in the world!” snapped Danger from behind the screen where she was dressing in her robes from yesterday. “Will you trust me when I say there was a reason and leave it at that?”

“No, I effing well won't!”

Aletha rolled her eyes and muttered something, pointing her wand at Sirius, who was pacing around the room, growling under his breath.

“Oy, what the—”

“Settle down,” said Aletha, smiling in spite of herself at the sight of Sirius caught in mid-stride by her Sticky Shoes Hex. “Under ordinary circumstances, you'd be perfectly right to demand an answer. I want an answer myself. But these aren't ordinary circumstances. I have a feeling there are forces beyond our control involved here – am I right, Danger?”

“At least one of you understands.” Danger came out from behind the screen. “Yes, Harry was in trouble last night. He could have died. But he didn't. Why didn't he? Because we were there, and able to help him.”

“But he shouldn't ever have been out there,” fumed Sirius, fumbling out his wand and releasing himself from the hex. “He's only eleven – he's not nearly ready for something like that – I know he's got to do it someday, but not now!”

“Tell me this,” said Danger. “Wouldn't we be in more trouble if we didn't know Voldemort was around?”

“Well... yes. If you don't know he's there, you're not guarding against him.”

“And isn't Harry the only person who could have figured out who that was last night?”

“Since Harry's the only other Parselmouth around, yeah.”

“So, since everyone came off without major injury, and now we know more than we did, will you just leave it?”

“No, I will not just leave it. I want to know what, if anything, was that senile diricawl's reason for sending my cubs into that Forest!”

Danger's eyes narrowed. “Fine. But just remember, you asked for it.” She walked right up to Sirius and shoved him. Surprised, Sirius stumbled backwards and sat down on the bed.

“Dumbledore suspected who might be in the Forest,” said Danger, standing over Sirius with her arms crossed. “But he couldn't go out looking himself, because that would have tipped Voldemort off. So he sent Harry.”

Sirius' face turned alarmingly red – he looked about ready to kill something, Aletha thought – but Danger wasn't finished. “But he wasn't just blindly sending Harry into danger. He's been studying us for years. Why do you think he kept inviting us back to Hogwarts? It wasn't just because he liked our company – though I'm vain enough to hope that was part of it – no, he was studying the way our magics interacted. Because we were starting to be magically bound together long before we swore that oath last December. That just codified it.”

Danger paused, as if arranging her thoughts. “Dumbledore was more or less certain that, if Harry, or the other cubs, were in some sort of danger, our Pack-magic would help them – and that the help would be enough, and that it would arrive in time. He's been watching us all year – when Remus fired the Bludger at the first Quidditch match, when I had my little magical fit at the second one, when Draco attacked the Slytherins—”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Harry and Hermione’s pendants activated when Draco got angry at the Slytherins for teasing Neville. That’s normal. But they didn’t cool back down – and they should have. Draco was having a fine time teasing Nott and the others, he shouldn’t have been upset at all. But the pendants didn’t cool off, and Harry and Hermione got worried and took off looking for him.”

“So they showed up in the entrance hall just when he needed them,” said Aletha, suddenly understanding. “That could have been a coincidence, but I tend to doubt it.”

“Still.” Sirius was starting to lose some of the anger in his face, but he still looked pretty steamed. “Still – to bet Harry’s life on a couple of things he’s noticed–”

“And he mentioned one other thing.” Danger sat down beside Sirius. “You bet your own life on something like this once.”

“What? When?”

“The same day we got these.” Danger hooked a finger around Sirius’ Pack-pendants. “You knew it wasn’t likely the Ministry would actually listen to you – they’d be more apt to send in a dementor. Why didn’t you run? Why didn’t you save yourself?”

“That’s not fair – it’s not the same thing at all.”

“Why not?”

“I was betting on you, not on some nebulous Pack-thing that as far as we know doesn’t even exist. You’ve never yet been wrong with one of those dreams of yours. But you didn’t dream anything about Harry or saving him–”

“My magic’s been coming up pretty reliably when Harry’s in trouble. I assume someone intended him some kind of harm at the Quidditch

match – it's possible that one shot I thought I blocked got partly through and stopped whoever it was."

"But it keeps getting out of your control—"

"It's never been out of my control." Danger smiled weakly. "Close, but never really out of it. And if it had gotten out of control last night, it would have saved Harry from Voldemort – I don't know what else it would have done, but it would have done that."

"All in all, it's just as well it didn't go out of control," said Aletha. "There was a lot of power there. I wouldn't care to see it unleashed."

Danger nodded. "We're working on it, Remus and I. If I can just remember the visualization on my own, without him to help me... personally, of course, I would be just as happy if this magic never came up again, since it only seems to come up when Harry's in trouble."

"Yes. Back to Harry." Sirius was still on the original line of thought. "If we hadn't been nearby—"

Danger punched him on the shoulder. "If we hadn't been nearby, I could have brought us. That magic was dying to be used – and I can channel it, if only imperfectly – I got a line on the boys, didn't I? So as much as you don't want to admit it, Dumbledore was right. The cavalry came charging in and saved the day."

"The cavalry got itself thrown into a tree," said Sirius, wincing at the memory. "And I still don't like it."

"No one asked you to like it," said Aletha acerbically.

"I don't like this, Albus," said Minerva two days later over tea. "You-Know-Who – oh, all right, Voldemort – here, on Hogwarts grounds, killing unicorns..."

"He is not here now, Minerva, as far as I have been able to tell. I have personally investigated all the staff and students, and none of them show any signs of being possessed."

“But that only tells you if they are possessed now, not if they were last night, or if they will be tomorrow...”

“In spirit form, Voldemort would find this place practically intolerable,” said Dumbledore calmly. “He would not linger here long without a body to inhabit. My next step, of course, will be to examine the people of Hogsmeade, and as many of the animals in the Forest and the lake as I can manage – the sentient inhabitants, I think, can take care of themselves.”

“Centaurs and merfolk and such, you mean?”

“Yes. They are, as a rule, more suspicious and less willing to listen to blandishments than humankind. And I highly doubt even Lord Voldemort could possess a sentient being against that being’s will – unless, perhaps, some kind of connection had previously existed between them...”

“In which case, perhaps you should look more closely at Severus,” said Minerva sharply.

There was no twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes. “Perhaps I should.”
“As this will be our last lesson of the year,” said Professor Lockhart importantly, “I’ve got a little treat for you. A recreation of my greatest triumph here at Hogwarts – my conquering of—”

He whisked the cloth away to reveal what looked like a large pile of rocks.

“The Halloween troll!”

A few people, mostly girls, clapped. Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, up front if you would,” said Lockhart briskly, “and lie down right there, that’s right, just like that – a little more crumpled, Weasley – that’s the ticket – good. Now then...”

He tapped the troll with his wand – Harry heard a tinny roar, and a few of the girls squealed. He lifted his head to get a better look at it.

“Head down, Harry, and eyes closed, you’re unconscious after all,” Lockhart admonished. Harry surrendered to the inevitable and lay down, shutting his eyes.

“When I came on the scene,” said Lockhart in a dramatic voice, “the troll had already clubbed your two young classmates senseless. I approached – thus – and seeing them helpless at its feet, snatched up the nearest item I could find – a piece of armor – and threw it against the wall.”

A clattering noise seemed to indicate that Lockhart had suited action to word.

“The loud noise distracted the troll, and whilst it looked about for the source of the sound, I readied my next weapon. Another piece of armor – but this I altered quickly with my wand – making it long and slender and pointed – and this I threw – directly into – the troll’s nose!”

“Eurgh!” said Seamus Finnegan’s voice.

“Indeed, Mr. Finnegan, you may well say ‘Eurgh’.” Harry hadn’t thought it was possible for Lockhart to sound any more dramatic, but he’d been wrong. “It is indeed quite a disgusting idea, throwing something into a creature’s nose – but the fact remains that the nose is one of the few weak points of the mountain troll. And while this specimen was busied with the irritant–”

Harry heard the mock-troll begin roaring again, and a few more people made sounds of disgust.

“I prepared my final attack. With a simple spell – one of the first you have learned here at Hogwarts – Wingardium Leviosa – I levitated the troll’s own club from its hand, hovered it to just above the horrid creature’s head – and dropped it.”

A solid sort of thunk, and the roaring stopped abruptly.

“Thus were Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, and indeed all of Hogwarts castle, saved from the terrible attentions of the mountain troll. Thank you, thank you very much indeed.”

The applause this time was much louder and actually sounded a bit genuine, Harry thought on his way back to his seat, sneaking a look at the mock-troll standing with the club stuck in a dent in its head. And for once, he'd agree that Lockhart deserved it. That had been rather clever of him – sticking something pointy up the troll's nose, then knocking it out with its own club...

Harry frowned. Something odd was happening in his mind. A feeling that he was repeating himself, or that he had been here before...

Draco slipped him a note as he sat down at his place.

You look funny. What's wrong?

He scribbled one back.

Nothing, really. Déjà vu, I think it's called. Feeling like you've done something before.

Draco passed it back a moment later.

All right. Just wondering.

“How'd you know about Fluffy?” demanded Hagrid the next day when the cubs asked him about the three-headed dog. “No one's s'posed to be goin' up there...”

“We didn't open the door,” said Hermione. “We just peeked through the keyhole.”

“So it is yours,” said Harry. “I thought it might be... did you say Fluffy?”

“Yeah, he's mine... and he's gotta have a name, doesn't he? I bought him off a Greek chappie, down at the pub, last year... lent him ter Dumbledore t'guard...” Hagrid broke off and busied himself with the teakettle.

“To guard the Sorcerer’s Stone?” asked Ron impressively.

“Merlin’s beard, is there anythin’ yeh four don’t know?” Hagrid looked astonished.

“We don’t know how you are,” said Draco. “Are you feeling better?”

“Ah, I’m all right. Takes more’n a knock on the head ter keep me down fer long.” Hagrid took the teakettle off the fire and poured the boiling water into the teapot.

“What happened, anyway?” asked Harry.

“Well, now, I’m not really sure. After I sent yeh all back ter the castle – you boys with Letha, and then Hermione and Neville with Sirius – I was just checking ‘round the poor unicorn when...” Hagrid frowned. “I don’t really remember, yeh know? Next thing I knew, Professor Lockhart was leanin’ over me, pokin’ at me with his wand, tellin’ me ter wake up – and it was morning already.” He blew on his mug of tea. “Professor Dumbledore reckons whatever went after them unicorns tried me on fer size – but I’m a mite harder ter drop than that.” He chuckled.

The young Pack looked at each other. Obviously, Dumbledore hadn’t told Hagrid who it was that had been killing the unicorns, or he wouldn’t be nearly so casual about it.

Voldemort never left anyone alive if he wanted them dead, thought Harry as they walked back to the castle later. No one except me.

So why is Hagrid still alive?

Harry didn’t have time to think much more about this, or about anything, as he was busy doing last-minute studying for his exams, which began in three days. They were very much like the stories he’d heard all his life – making a pineapple tap-dance, turning a mouse into a snuffbox, that sort of thing – except for Lockhart’s Defense Against the Dark Arts exam, which was the very same pretest he’d given them at the beginning of the year, all about himself. Harry had a feeling he wouldn’t be doing too well on it, but did his best anyway.

For a miracle, Neville didn't make anything explode during the Potions practical, but his potion was a pale pink and runny where it should have been bright red and thick, and Harry saw Snape marking something on his parchment that looked suspiciously like a zero. Harry's own potion wasn't the bright cherry color of Draco's or the phone-box hue of Hermione's, but it wasn't pink either. Ron's, ironically, turned maroon (Hermione said later it was from overstirring), and he couldn't get it to thicken properly before Snape called time.

History of Magic was the last exam, for which Harry was grateful, since it was the one he needed to study for the most – he hadn't paid attention in class all year, since he knew that if he did Professor Binns' voice would just put him to sleep, and Hermione's notes were as good as the book to study from.

"What would you do if I didn't let you read my notes?" asked Hermione one evening in the common room.

"Then we'd fail," said Ron promptly. "And you'd have that on your conscience – your poor, helpless friends failed their first year at Hogwarts, all because you were selfish with your notes."

Hermione rolled her eyes and handed them over.

Finally, finally, the exam was over, and Harry cheered with everyone else as he dropped his school-issued, Anti-Cheating quill into its holder and rolled up his test parchment. Professor Binns admonished them not to push and shove at the door, but that was easy for him to say, Harry thought – all he had to do was go through the wall.

They all got outside eventually, and found a comfortable patch of grass, with room for five, just enough sun, and just enough shade, and occupied it before anyone else could.

"Did anyone else get number twelve?" asked Hermione.

Draco sat up. "Was that the one about the..."

“Don’t,” said Ron with a groan. “Please, do not start going through them again. Once is enough.”

Hermione looked indignant. “But I was just asking...”

“Don’t.”

“Over,” said Harry, feeling blissfully free. “It’s all over.” He sat up. “Over,” he sang on a low note.

“Over...” Draco added a harmony note a fifth up.

“Over...” Ron put in the third.

“Over,” finished Hermione, spreading her hands in surrender and singing the octave above Harry.

“I wish I could sing,” said Neville wistfully when they let the chord go.

“How do you know you can’t?” asked Draco.

“I never learned how.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t. Do you know ‘Sing a Song of Sixpence’?”

“Everyone knows that.”

“So sing it.”

Neville did.

“See, you can sing,” said Hermione. “You have a nice voice.”

“Letha says almost anybody can sing, if they just try.” Draco stood up. “Come on, let’s go back to the dorm – I’ve got some music in my trunk you might like.”

Harry watched them go. “We’ll have to have Neville come visit this summer,” he said lazily.

“Meghan’ll like that.” Hermione was lying in the sun, almost audibly purring.

“I hope I can come visit this summer,” said Ron, rolling his shoulders. “Ginny says Mum’s still pretending your family doesn’t exist.”

“What about your dad?” asked Harry.

“Oh, you know him, he doesn’t go against Mum unless he thinks it’s really important – and he still thinks she’ll come around on her own.”

“Do you think that?” asked Hermione.

Ron sighed. “I don’t know.”

Harry suddenly felt an urge to do something. “Let’s go see Hagrid,” he said, getting up. “See what he’s doing this summer.”

“Same thing he does every summer – staying here and keeping up with the grounds,” said Hermione. But she got up and followed Harry towards Hagrid’s hut, and when he started singing one of the cubs’ favorite songs, a folk song about hearing a girl singing about her sorrows, she joined him at the first chorus. Ron joined in too, and Hagrid opened the door in response to Harry’s knock just in time to hear them sing the last phrase of the chorus in harmony.

“Lovely,” he said, applauding them and beckoning them in. “Right lovely, that is. I oughta hire yeh ter sing lullabies fer Fluffy.”

“Lullabies for Fluffy?” repeated Harry, laughing. “Does he like music?”

“Oh, he loves it – play him a bit o’ music, or sing it, like, and he goes straight off ter sleep...”

Hagrid stopped, an almost frightened expression crossing his big face. “I shouldn’ta told yeh that!” he blurted out. “Fergit I said it!”

“We will,” said Hermione quickly. “Don’t worry, we wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Good.” Hagrid sat down in his big armchair, looking perplexed.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harry.

“Nothin’... just havin’... oh, what’s it the Frenchies call it, day-jar voo...”

“Déjà vu?”

“That’s it – that feelin’ like yeh’ve been somewhere before. Just now – tellin’ yeh about Fluffy – made me feel that way. Like I told someone else about it...” Hagrid frowned. “But I don’t think I told anyone else – least, I shouldn’ta... more’n my job’s worth, that...”

Harry nodded in agreement, then winced suddenly as a sharp pain lanced through his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ron.

“Just a headache.”

“You’ve been having a lot of headaches this week,” said Hermione. “Have you told anyone?”

“No, I don’t want to worry them – it’s probably nothing.”

“Not if it’s right there,” said Hermione, touching her finger to Harry’s scar. “Is it?”

Harry nodded.

“Fine, come on.”

“Come on where?” asked Ron, getting to his feet.

“We’re going to ask Professor McGonagall if we can use the Floo.”

“No, I’m afraid you can’t,” said Professor McGonagall, “but it’s no fault of yours. The castle Floo network is down, nothing can get in or out –

what was so urgent that you needed to tell your family – I assume that's who you wanted to call?"

"I've just been having headaches," said Harry.

"Well, in that case, I would recommend going to the hospital wing rather than the fireplace, Mr. Potter. Good day." Professor McGonagall turned back to her work.

"That's kind of strange," said Ron as they walked down the hall. "The Floo Network almost never goes down – sometimes you get held up in it for a while, but it's nearly always working. So where are we going now?"

"Let's go find Draco and Neville," said Hermione.

Since no one else had a better idea, they headed for Gryffindor Tower, where they found the two boys alone in the first years' dorm, Draco playing a melody on his flute, Neville listening.

"Are we going to tell them?" Hermione asked Harry quietly off to one side.

"Why shouldn't we?"

"We said we wouldn't tell anyone."

"Anyone who would get Hagrid in trouble or try to steal the – thing. They're not."

"All right." They came out of their huddle and found seats in time for Draco to finish. When he did, they applauded him, then proceeded to tell him and Neville what had happened down at Hagrid's hut.

When they got to the part about déjà vu, Draco frowned. "Harry, didn't you have that about a week ago? In Lockhart's class?"

"Yeah... when he did that bit with the troll... maybe I do remember it, after all."

“I was going to ask you about that, but we got busy with exams and it slipped my mind. Do you remember anything about that night?”

Harry shook his head. “How come?”

“Because Lockhart says he stuck something up the troll’s nose, but if he did, you did it first.”

“You’re right,” said Hermione, her eyes widening. “You’re right – Harry, you jumped on the troll’s back and your wand went up its nose! That wasn’t Lockhart at all!”

Harry closed his eyes. “I jumped on the troll’s back,” he said, trying to imagine it. “And my wand went up its nose. Ron was throwing armor against the wall... and I told you to get Hermione out, Draco... and then...”

I want to remember. I want to remember what happened. I want to remember what happened that night...

It was like a litany, repeated over and over in his mind – or like a battering ram that he was using against a locked door... only the door was starting to crack...

“And then you took your wand out, Ron. You did the Levitating Charm – Wingardium Leviosa – and you levitated the troll’s club over its head – and I jumped clear and you let it go...” Harry opened his eyes. “It wasn’t Lockhart at all. It was us. We took the troll down. Lockhart came along afterwards.”

“I did that?” Ron looked amazed. “But – why don’t we remember, then?”

Harry shut his eyes again, but the answer came, not from him, but from another source.

“Maybe he used a Memory Charm on you.”

“A Memory Charm?” repeated Hermione, turning to Neville.

“A Memory Charm.” Neville nodded. “To make you forget.”

“But why would he do that?” asked Ron.

“So he could claim he took the troll out and saved you,” said Draco. “When you really saved yourselves.”

Something suddenly locked together in Harry’s mind. “Lockhart found Hagrid. All the teachers were out searching for him, but it was Lockhart who found him. What if that’s because Lockhart knew where to look?”

“How would he know where to look?” asked Hermione.

“If he attacked Hagrid in the first place,” said Ron, looking angry. “The twins tried that once or twice when I was little – they’d steal my teddy bear and hide it, and then be the big heroes who found it because I wouldn’t go to sleep without it.”

“But why do you think Lockhart attacked Hagrid, Harry?” asked Draco.

“Hagrid had déjà vu about Fluffy,” said Harry, piecing it together as he spoke. “The way I had déjà vu about Halloween. What if it’s for the same reason?”

“Because someone – Lockhart, I suppose – put a Memory Charm on Hagrid?” Hermione looked perplexed. “Why would he want to...” Her eyes went very wide, and she stifled a gasp with her hand.

“What?” asked Ron in perplexity.

“He wants to steal the Stone,” whispered Hermione. “He wants to steal the Stone – maybe he’s working for Voldemort–” Ron recoiled and Neville squeaked. “But even if he’s not, now he knows how to get past Fluffy, and everything else would just be magic, and he’s a great wizard, look at everything he’s done in all his books, he could get past anything–”

“We’ve got to go to Dumbledore,” said Harry, jumping to his feet. “Come on, we’ve got to tell him this – even if it gets Hagrid in trouble, better that than having the Stone get stolen—”

They pelted down the stairs, out the portrait hole, down more stairs, and almost ran over Professor McGonagall. “Where on earth are you going?” she asked in astonishment.

“We have to see Professor Dumbledore,” Harry panted out. “We have to tell him something...”

“Well, I’m afraid whatever it is, it will have to wait. He’s not here at the moment – he’s gone to London on urgent business.”

Harry looked back at his Pack in desperation. “Professor – it’s about the Sorcerer’s Stone.”

Professor McGonagall, who was polishing her glasses, almost dropped them. “How in the world – no, never mind, I should have remembered who your parents are – if they told you—”

“They didn’t, we figured it out—”

“Professor, we think someone’s going to try to steal the Stone—”

“We think Professor Lockhart—”

“Nonsense,” said Professor McGonagall sternly, putting her glasses back on. “I don’t know what you’ve heard, but no one could possibly steal the Stone, it’s too well protected, and I won’t hear another word against Gilderoy Lockhart – a nitwit he may be, and you’re not to repeat that, but even he wouldn’t be so foolish as to try what you’re proposing. Outdoors with you, and not another word about this to anyone, is that perfectly clear?”

Harry was tempted to try again, but he knew from the look on her face that Professor McGonagall wouldn’t listen to anything else he said. “Yes, Professor.”

The dispirited five trailed outside into the bright sunshine. Neville caught sight of Professor Sprout and hurried off to ask her something about the Herbology exam.

Harry looked at the other three.

“He’s going after it tonight,” he said. “He must be. He got Dumbledore out of the way, then he shut down the Floo Network somehow so no one can get word out and Dumbledore can’t get back quickly – it’s tonight.” He set his shoulders. “And I’m going down after him.”

(A/N: Yes, getting towards climax time, aren’t we? Have I mentioned lately how much I love my reviewers? And the lurkers, I do love you too, but I’d love you more if you’d drop me a review! It doesn’t have to be long... though I really do love the long ones... and I’ll even give you a topic... exclamation points. See you soon!

Oh yes, disclaimer: there may be a few quotes from PS/SS in here... if there are, I’m sorry, they are inadvertent, and I’ll fix them if you’ll point them out...)

Chapter 17: Letting Go

This coming night, be wakeful all
And ready for the silent call;
The moon speaks truly, warrior maid,
So to her word heed must be paid.
The pearl in this game plays no part,
But praise deserves for willing heart,
And honor is returners' due
As much as they who see it through.
So thread the maze with stealth and guile,
The matriarch to reconcile,
And once again play out the game
With skill of song and wand and flame.

Aletha handed the parchment to Sirius and heaved a sigh. "Here we go again."

"Honestly, we were probably overdue," said Remus. "You haven't had one of these for well over a year, have you?"

Danger shook her head. "I did have one the day the cubs left for Hogwarts, but it was just a little twiddle, predicting Neville making friends with them, and telling me something personal I had to do. So I haven't had a serious one since last Christmas – and like that one, this one happened during a nap, which means it's coming soon and they want us to pay really close attention to it."

“This is the first time you’ve had a certain time predicted, isn’t it?” asked Sirius, coming around the table to stand beside Danger. “Here, ‘this coming night’. I don’t think you’ve ever had quite that concrete a time stated before. Whatever’s going to happen, it’s going to happen tonight.”

“And we’re not supposed to go to sleep,” said Aletha. “We might all do well to catch naps in what’s left of the afternoon, if we’re going to be up late tonight.”

Remus read over Danger’s other shoulder. “‘Warrior maid’ has meant you before,” he said to her. “Though you’re not technically a ‘maid’ any more.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Now that’s a trick question if I ever heard one,” said Sirius.

“‘The moon speaks truly... so to her word heed must be paid,’” Remus read aloud. “Hmm. When does the moon speak?”

“Maybe the man in the moon,” said Aletha. “He’ll lean way down and yell something, and you’ll have to listen carefully, because he’s not going to repeat himself.”

“No, it’s a she,” said Danger, smiling at her friend’s silliness. “It’s ‘to her word’. Possibly the moon itself, personified – or the goddess of the moon, like Diana or Selene...”

“Or Luna?”

Everyone looked at Sirius. He shrugged. “Just a thought.”

“Makes sense, though, which is more than can be said for many of your thoughts.” Aletha ducked her husband’s playful swat. “So Luna’s going to say something that you have to listen to, Danger. And then there’s a couple of lines about a pearl... no prizes for guessing that one.”

"If I'm reading this right, which I hope I am, she has to stay behind tonight," said Sirius. "If we're going to have to do something dangerous, she'd just be in the way – but you know she's not going to want to hear that."

"Thus, 'praise deserves for willing heart,'" said Remus. "Your daughter for certain, Padfoot – she'd be perfectly willing to go charging into anything, even things she has no chance of winning—"

"What are you insinuating?"

"But we're going to have to make sure she stays out of this one," continued Remus as if he hadn't heard Sirius. "And make sure she knows we're proud that she wants to help."

"Not a problem," said Aletha with a smile. "What about the rest of it? Honor due to returners, threading a maze, reconciling a matriarch, the whole bit?"

"Not a clue," said Danger. "Which usually means we'll figure it out afterwards and say, 'Oh, that should have been so obvious!'"

"Hindsight is perfect," said Remus with a sigh. "All right, let's get planning under way, here. If we're all supposed to go on this quest or mission or whatever you want to call it tonight, Meghan has to stay with someone – and since Molly's still not speaking to us, it'll have to be Gerald and Luna – Letha, would you handle that? And Sirius, would you start getting Meghan used to the idea?"

"Of what, us running off and leaving her behind again?"

"Something like that."

"I'll try, but you know she's still upset about the last time, and I can't blame her. Having a sleepover interrupted by the news that your brothers are in peril of their lives – not pleasant."

"There has to be some way we can shut off her pendants," said Danger. "Just temporarily, and just the incoming messages, because honestly, there's nothing she can do."

“Why don’t you go take another nap and ask about that,” said Remus.

“Sounds like an idea.” Danger got up from the kitchen chair and headed for the living room, where the most comfortable couch was to be found. Aletha was in the music room already, firecalling the Lovegoods’ house, and Sirius nodded to Remus before starting upstairs to find Meghan.

And then there was one.

Remus got up and stretched his back.

I think I’ll pack a small survival kit. We can shrink it down so it doesn’t impede us – and better safe than sorry.

He started rummaging through the pantry for portable, nonperishable food.

“Going down after him?” repeated Hermione in a disbelieving tone.

“I’ll go with you,” said Ron.

“You’re crazy,” said Draco.

“Yes, thank you, and I know.”

“Harry – you can’t!” Hermione looked around, making sure there was no one close enough to hear her. “This is Voldemort we’re talking about here – oh, get over it, Ron – you can’t go fight him on your own!”

“I’m not going on my own. Ron’s going with me.”

“Oh, fat lot of help he’s going to be,” sneered Draco. “Can’t even hear the name without flinching – what kind of backup’s he going to be in a fight?”

“At least I said I’d go!” Ron snapped back. “I don’t hear you volunteering!”

“Are you calling me a coward?”

“I don’t know – are you going or not?”

“Not – and I’m going to try and keep you two from going too.”

“Then yes, I am calling you a coward.”

“I’ll make you eat that, you red-headed idiot!” Draco was on his feet, so was Ron – Harry and Hermione jumped up as well – Harry tackled Ron, Hermione tripped Draco, and everything was confusion for a moment until everyone got sorted out, breathing a little harder and looking at each other balefully.

“Get this straight,” said Harry harshly when he got his glasses straightened out. “I’m going through that trapdoor tonight because if we don’t do something, no one will – and Voldemort will get the Stone.” He ignored Ron. “And then he’ll be back – he’ll be able to live forever – and how long do you think any of us will be able to fight him? We can send some owls now – to Dumbledore, to the Pack-parents, telling them what we know and what we’re going to do – but they won’t get there probably until early tomorrow morning, and I’m going down there tonight. Alone if I have to.”

“You’re not going alone,” said Ron resolutely.

“Thanks,” said Harry. “Neenie?”

Hermione looked at him pleadingly. “You’re sure you won’t change your mind?”

“Dead sure,” said Harry with a firm nod.

“We’d better hope that doesn’t come true,” said Draco with a sigh. “All right, I’m in. I still say you’re mad, though.”

They all looked at Hermione.

She got to her feet. “I’ll go start looking up magical safeguards,” she said. “I might run across one of the spells they’ve used.”

"I'll go with you," said Draco.

"I'll start sending owls," said Harry. "Ron, can you make us a plan for tonight? How we can get to the third floor without too much danger of getting caught?"

"I can try. I could use the Marauder's Map, it's got all the secret passages on it... anyone seen Fred and George?"

They scattered, unaware that someone had been listening to them. Aletha played a series of scales on the piano, up and down and up and down, change keys a half-step and do it again – up and down and up and down, change keys a half-step and do it again – up and down and –

"Please."

"Please what?"

"Please stop it."

"Would you rather have me tearing my hair out?"

Danger looked tempted, but shook her head.

"Well, it's that, or this." Aletha tapped the piano.

"Go on, then, but don't say I didn't warn you..."

Both women froze. From the other room came a pair of quiet curses and a little girl's half-stifled moan.

Danger had her pendants out first, and muttered a curse when she saw what was glowing. "All three of them. I'd say that's a 'silent call'."

Meghan came running into the room, overnight bag over one shoulder, and held her arms out to Aletha, who pulled her into a fierce hug. "Don't get killed," she said, voice shivering slightly. "Please don't get killed."

"Nobody's going to get killed," said Sirius as calmly as he could, joining the hug.

"Promise?"

"I wish I could, Pearl. But we promised we wouldn't lie to you."

"We'll do our best," said Aletha calmly. "And our best is very good. You know that."

Meghan nodded, one tear tracking down her face. The Blacks stood for a moment together, then released Meghan, who went to hug Remus goodbye as well. Then she and Danger approached the fire.

"Lovegood residence," said Meghan, stepping into the green flames, and Danger followed her a moment later.

"I'll be back in a moment," said Remus.

"Where are you going?" asked Sirius.

Remus didn't bother to answer. "The Burrow!" he announced to the Floo, and let the flames take him away.

He caught himself on the Weasleys' hearth and saw Molly's face turn to the fire, welcoming and open, then suddenly close down as she saw who it was.

"I know you're not happy with us, Molly," he said quietly, stepping out onto the hearthstone. "But we thought you ought to know this. Our cubs are in some kind of danger, and since Ron goes everywhere they go, it's likely he's involved as well. We're on our way there now, and I promise you, if Ron's in any kind of trouble, we'll do as much for him as we would for our own. We'll let you know as soon as we know anything."

He Disapparated, returning to the Den.

"Any luck?" asked Aletha.

"I don't know." Remus looked out the window toward where he knew the Burrow was. "I really don't know."

Danger's Floo trip took only a few instants to make, since the Lovegoods lived so close by. Gerald and Luna were waiting. "It's the children," she said in response to Gerald's questioning look.

"Good luck, then," said Gerald, holding out his hand for Danger to shake. "Send us word as soon as you can."

"We will. Goodbye, Meghan. We'll be back soon, and everything will be all right." She embraced the child – my little Pearl, as dear as any daughter of my own could ever be – then took the girl's cold pendants in her hand. "Cesso Nuntius Insignis," she said, and felt them first warm, then cool to the normal temperature of metal. Meghan accepted them back, clutching them in her hand.

"Good luck, Mrs. Granger-Lupin," said Luna, holding out her own hand. Her dreamy eyes were fixed rather disconcertingly on Danger. "You can have too much of anything. Even control."

"I'll remember that, Luna. Thank you." With one last smile for Meghan, Danger Apparated back to the Den.

Anything?

I'm not sure. "You can have too much of anything, even control." Suppose we'll figure it out when we get there.

I suppose. Remus threw Floo powder into the fireplace. "Let's go, then," he said as the green flames roared. He stepped into the fire. "Hogwarts kitchens!"

The flames went out. Remus was left standing in an empty fireplace, looking severely confused. "What the—"

"Something's wrong with the Network," said Sirius. "Let's not waste time trying to figure it out – what's the next quickest way to Hogwarts?"

"Apparate to Hogsmeade and walk," said Aletha. "Or run."

Remus exited the fireplace. "Run, I think we can manage. And at least one of us can fly."

Aletha nodded. "I knew those wings were going to come in handy for something."

"Come on," said Danger. "Last one to Hogsmeade is lion chow."
Aletha was lucky enough to run into Nearly Headless Nick just as she got through the main doors. "Aletha! What brings you here tonight?"

"Hello, Sir Nicholas – I need to talk to Dumbledore right away, do you know if he's available?"

"I'm afraid he's not here, he went to London this afternoon, but Minerva's in her office, she's not in bed yet."

"Thank you, that's a great help – Sirius and Remus and Danger are coming, do you think you could tell them where I am when they get here?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you!" Aletha hurried in the general direction of Minerva McGonagall's office, only getting lost once, which was better than usual for Hogwarts. When she found it, she didn't even bother to knock, storming in instead. "What's the current password for the Tower?" she demanded.

Minerva, in a tartan bathrobe and slippers and reading a novel, looked astonished and more than a little angry. "Really, Aletha, this is a bit out of line—"

"I don't care. My cubs are in danger of dying, and I want to find them – are you going to help me or not?"

"Dying?"

"Yes, dying. Where are they?"

“At this hour, they ought to be in bed—”

The two women raced towards Gryffindor Tower. A huge black dog and a shaggy tan wolf caught them up halfway there. “Remus is coming,” panted Danger, turning human again. “He had to change back when he got into the castle – didn’t want to frighten anyone – but I can pass for a dog.”

“Janus,” said Minerva to the Fat Lady, who swung her portrait obediently open. She climbed through the hole and stopped dead for an instant, causing Aletha to almost run into her. “Merciful heavens – Longbottom!”

Aletha catapulted herself through the hole to see Neville Longbottom lying on the floor, stiff as a board, looking at them pleadingly. “The full Body-Bind,” said Minerva, pulling out her wand and quickly reciting the counter-curse. “But who—”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” were the first words out of Neville’s mouth. “Mrs. Freeman-Black – Mrs. Granger-Lupin – Mr. Black – I’m sorry, I couldn’t stop them—”

“Who?” asked Aletha, but she already knew the answer.

Neville got awkwardly to his feet, obviously very stiff. “Harry and the others – they said they were going through the trapdoor tonight, the one that big dog is guarding – they said they thought You-Know-Who was going to try to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone—”

Minerva threw up her hands in exasperation. “Does everyone know about that blasted thing?”

“Just us,” said Neville timidly. “Hermione figured it out at Christmas. Harry said it was secret – we haven’t told anyone, really we haven’t—”

“Hermione figured it out?” repeated Remus, who had come through the portrait hole in time to hear this. “How did she do that?”

“I don’t know – I tried to stop them, I really did, but Hermione used a spell on me – they said they were sorry, but they had to do it, and

they put on the Invisibility Cloak and left, it was just a few minutes ago, I think—”

“They have an Invisibility Cloak?” asked Minerva, her voice acquiring a snap.

“It’s Harry’s, it used to be James’, Dumbledore gave it to him last Christmas,” said Sirius absently. “But how would they even have been able to get started? How would they get past that dog of Hagrid’s? Minerva, do you know?”

Minerva shook her head. “Only Albus and Hagrid know how—”

“Pardon me,” said Danger ever so politely, changed forms, and leapt out the portrait hole.

“Where is she going?” asked Aletha.

“To get an answer,” said Remus. “Come on, we’d better get to the third floor, so we can use it right away, whatever it is – the faster we can get to them, the better chance they have of living through this.” Danger galloped through the halls of Hogwarts, utterly furious and allowing that fury to fuel her run.

Only Dumbledore and Hagrid know how to get past that dog. And of the two, only Hagrid would have been so careless as to tell the cubs.

She shot through the entrance hall, out the front doors, across the lawn, and turned human again on Hagrid’s front steps, pausing only long enough to open his door with her wand before she was inside. “Wake up!” she shouted at the top of her lungs at the huge, sleeping figure in the bed.

Hagrid came awake with a yell, thrashing around for a moment before he settled down. Danger brought his fire up with a wave of her hand and lit the lamp with a look, lighting the room brightly enough for him to recognize her.

“Don’t even start,” she said brusquely, cutting off whatever Hagrid was about to say. “I know you told my cubs how to get past that

three-headed monstrosity of yours. I know because whatever you told them, they've used, and they are now down that trapdoor, risking their lives. So you are going to tell me how to get past it, and you are going to tell me right now, because if you do not they are going to die." The last word was snarled through bared teeth.

Hagrid looked horrified. "Music," he blurted quickly. "Music, yeh just play him some music, or sing ter him – they really went down there?"

Got it, said Remus in her head. We're going in, track with what we're doing and catch up with us –

I will. "Thank you," said Danger aloud, loading her tone with sarcasm. "We'll be sure to let you know if we get them out of there alive." Without a backward glance, she turned wolf and charged back towards the castle.

Sirius hauled the trapdoor open, Aletha's wordless singing keeping Fluffy asleep. Remus generated a ball of fire and sent it down into the darkness.

"Mr. Padfoot would like to state that he's scared out of his mind," muttered Sirius, watching the fire descend.

"Mr. Moony would like to reciprocate that statement."

The fire illuminated something tangled and green, which seemed to be thrashing around. Remus squinted at it. "That wasn't there last time we were here... it looks like a plant of some kind..."

"Devil's Snare," said Sirius with certainty. "Send the fire closer to it – there, see? It backed away. Only Devil's Snare acts like that. So it'll cushion our landing, then try to kill us."

"How do you know?"

"My mother kept a few potted ones."

Despite their circumstances, despite the situation, despite everything, Remus had to laugh a little. "I'll go first," he said. "Then you two come

– I'll keep it off you. Leave the trapdoor open, so Danger can handle it herself when she gets here."

"All right," said Sirius. "Ready when you are."

Remus sat down on the edge of the opening, reached across to grasp the opposite edge, and let himself hang by his hands for a moment before he let go.

It was a long fall, but not unbearable, and the Devil's Snare did indeed cushion his landing admirably. Instead of bothering to burn individual creepers of it away, he simply surrounded his entire body with flames and walked unmolested out of the plant's purview. "Come ahead!" he shouted upwards, and summoned flame, giving it silent instructions – burn only the plant, not the humans, or their clothes, or their belongings. Fire, like cubs, was always looking for loopholes.

Sirius and Aletha were soon safely beside him. "Should we wait?" asked Aletha, recovering her breath.

"No, Danger's almost there – she'll be here soon enough. Let's go." They set off down a stone passageway with water trickling down the walls. Remus conjured another ball of fire to light their way.

"Shh!" said Aletha suddenly, stopping.

"What?"

"Can you hear something?"

The men listened. "I think I hear music," said Sirius doubtfully.

"I know I hear music," said Remus, breaking into a run. "Draco?"

"I'm here!" The shout echoed back along the passage as Remus burst into a dome-like chamber, brightly lit, with things fluttering around above him – but that didn't interest him. Draco was sitting against the wall across the room, one hand pressed to his side, his recorder lying beside him, his face paler than usual and filled with relief.

“Are you all right?” Remus was across the room in an instant, kneeling beside the boy.

“It’s not bad – probably just a cracked rib – the Devil’s Snare squeezed me pretty hard – but I still helped Harry get the key, and then I beat the boggart–”

“You beat the boggart?” Remus smiled proudly at Draco. “Good for you. How’d you do it?”

“We’ll get the key,” said Sirius, coming into the room behind him. “Come on, Letha, let’s Beat it down.”

“That’s so horrible.”

“Ron was the first one into the room,” said Draco as Sirius and Aletha took off on the provided broomsticks. “So it turned into a big spider and he screamed and ran away from it. Then Harry tried a spell on it, and it turned into – it looked like Padfoot, but he was all mad and bigger than he should have been, and then I knew what it had to be, so I took it on. It turned into Lucius, and I put him in a clown suit and gave him a slapstick instead of his wand.” His smile flashed brightly for a moment, then faded. “But we were wrong.”

“What were you wrong about?”

“We thought it was Professor Lockhart who was after the Stone. But it can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Someone went on from that room, but it wasn’t him. He’s still there.”

“Still there?”

Draco nodded, looking a bit ill. “He’s...”

Understanding rushed over Remus. “I see.”

"I touched him," said Draco, staring at the opposite wall. "I touched him and he was cold. He looked scared. Can people get scared to death?"

"It can happen." Remus sat next to Draco and put an arm around his shoulders, and Draco leaned into him. He looked up and smiled in spite of himself. Sirius and Aletha had cornered the key they were after, but instead of grabbing it, they were smacking it back and forth between them with open hands, for all the world as if it were a Bludger.

Danger came tearing into the room and threw herself down beside Draco, pulling him quickly into a gentle embrace so as not to hurt him further. Remus got up to go help Sirius and Aletha, who were gradually descending, hitting the key back and forth the whole way down. He whistled to get their attention, then changed forms and crouched, ready for his lunge –

Sirius hauled off and slapped the key downwards hard, and Remus leapt, catching it in his mouth, feeling it struggling against his teeth and tongue. He loped quickly to the door, changed forms again, and took it out of his mouth, unlocking the door and opening it for everyone.

"Why didn't you just take it instead of hitting it like that?" asked Danger, standing up.

"We would have lost it if we'd tried grabbing it," answered Sirius, landing and dismounting. "So we went with what we're good at."

"Don't leave me alone?" begged Draco, sounding much younger than almost twelve.

"Of course not," said Aletha, coming to the boy's side. "I'll stay with you. Come back for me if I'm needed."

"We will," said Remus, letting the door swing shut behind him.

"Sirius, I think this one is yours," said Danger as they hurried along the next passage. "You up to some greatest fear combat?"

“Bring it on.” Sirius drew his wand without breaking stride.

They came out into a narrow stone chamber with a wardrobe at the farther end of it. Gilderoy Lockhart lay at one side of it, his face twisted in lines of fear. His hat and wig lay a few feet away. Remus conjured a cloth and draped it over the body, then turned to the wardrobe, which Sirius was approaching.

The doorknob rattled, then turned, and out of the wardrobe glided a dementor. The room seemed to chill, the lights to dim –

“Expecto Patronum!” shouted Sirius, his wand ready.

Silver mist erupted from the end of his wand, more of it every second – it began to coalesce into a shape – a shape with four long, graceful legs, and wings –

Sirius stared. “All right,” he said bemusedly. “Whatever. Go on, get it.”

The winged horse Patronus charged at the false dementor, which stumbled backwards and fell, collapsing into a pile of fabric. “Riddikulus!” Sirius shouted quickly, and the fabric turned bright yellow with purple polka dots covering it, making all three Marauders laugh.

Boggart and Patronus faded from sight. Sirius turned in perplexity to the other two. “That’s not my Patronus,” he said. “Mine’s a dog. Letha’s is the winged horse. What’s going on here?”

“Don’t know,” said Remus. “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

The Pack had set it up so that the exit to this room was in the wardrobe itself, so that one had to completely defeat the boggart before moving on. The three of them climbed through the wardrobe and ran along the next passage – Remus pulled out his pendants and had a look. The carving of the fox had stopped glowing, but the other two were still shining brightly.

“What’s next?” asked Danger.

“McGonagall’s chessboard,” said Sirius. “Who’s going to play?”

“I don’t think we have the time,” said Remus. “We may have to try to break through some other way.”

They ran into the darkened room, which lighted as they entered, and looked around.

Danger cried out, pointing. Against one wall lay an unconscious Ron Weasley.

Remus ran towards the boy but was stopped by the black chess pieces, which sprang to life and blocked his way.

“Move,” said Remus grimly.

A black knight shook its head.

“Fine, you asked for it.” He turned back to Sirius and Danger. “Shield your eyes,” he warned them. “This will be bright.”

Come, he called to the fire. It answered as always, coming joyfully to his hands.

Destroy these things of living stone, he told it. Hurt not the boy or his belongings, or the man or his belongings, or anything else here. But these thirty-two, destroy.

The fire went gleefully to work.

A few moments later, Remus stepped over a puddle of molten black stone and felt for Ron’s pulse. He’s alive, he told Danger. And I don’t think badly hurt – he was probably taken in the course of the game.

And this clears our way to go on, said Danger admiringly. Then her tone turned worried. But we can’t take him on with us – someone’s going to have to go back with him –

Remus lifted Ron carefully in a rescue-carry and stepped back over the molten stone, which was already cooling. "We'll draw for it," he said. "Short straw takes Ron back, other two go on."

"No," said Sirius. "I go back. You two go on."

"You don't have to do that, Sirius—"

"And honor is returners' due/ As much as they who see it through," Sirius interrupted. "That's for me. Telling me not to let my stupid pride get in the way of saving Harry. He's in trouble, and you two have the best chance of getting him out of it – so go. Don't waste time arguing with me."

Remus grinned. "Mr. Moony would like to congratulate Mr. Padfoot on finally growing up."

"Mr. Padfoot would like to tell Mr. Moony to stop wasting time."

"Fine, I'm going." Remus swung Ron down off his shoulder and lowered him onto the stretcher Sirius hastily conjured. "See you when we get back."

The opposite door of the chamber slammed open, and Hermione bolted in – Remus would have run to her, except that at the same moment, Danger gasped and wrapped her arms around herself, as if trying to stop something bursting out of her – her magic, Remus felt as he opened his mind to her.

Harry's in – he's face to face with him – that's what this means –

Damn it, we have to get to him – get this under control, Danger, and do it now!

I'm trying – help me –

I'm here. But we can't afford to lose you tonight, so we're going to have to try a new approach – don't try to control it all at once, just limit where it can go...

Remus helped Danger bring the power under her control, bit by bit, trying not to swear at the lost time. Finally, the power seethed just under her skin, making her hair crackle with a life of its own, but was no longer threatening to break free. I've never been able to do this before – it's always been either all out of control or knocked me out –

You're getting stronger then. Come on, Kitten's waiting for us.

Hermione sprang up from her place beside Sirius and dashed over to them when they beckoned her. They held her close for one instant, then listened to the story she had already told Sirius, of the chess match Ron had won for them at the cost of his own sacrifice, the unconscious troll, the room with the seven bottles where she and Harry had parted ways –

"We'd better go on, then," said Remus, getting up. "We'll see you when we get back, Kitten – be good, we love you—"

"I know." Hermione hugged them again, hard, once each, then hurried through the door leading back.

"Good luck," said Sirius quietly, steering the stretcher with the unconscious Ron on it through the door in front of him. "Bring him home."

"We will," promised Danger.

The door closed behind him.

The Lupins looked at each other.
Ready?

No.

Let's do it anyway.

I knew you were going to say that.

They hurried across the chessboard, dotted with what had been chessmen and were now solidified puddles of black and white stone,

and walked quickly through the room containing the unconscious troll, breathing shallowly through their mouths. Once in the room containing Snape's challenge, they changed forms, and lion and wolf approached the black flame.

Remus tested it with a paw and gave a nod of approval – it might be black, but it was still fire, and hadn't harmed him at all. Cautiously, they both stuck their heads into it and listened.

There was silence. Then a voice spoke. High-pitched, chilling, little more than a whisper...

"Harry Potter..."

Voldemort, growled Remus mentally, and Danger saw his mane bristling. That's Voldemort – he is here!

"See what I now am? Less than a ghost, vapor and shadow... I must share the body of another if I wish to have a physical form..."

You were right, it was possession... but who?

"But there are always those who will listen to me and let me into their minds and their hearts... my loyal Quirrell, for one... and the foolish Lockhart, for another..."

Remus and Danger stared at each other, astonished.

Quirrell?

Lockhart?

"It has been my only amusement this year, watching them battle for my favor... Lockhart bullying you in class, then trying to kill you in his bumbling way, sending the Bludger after you at your first Quidditch match... I punished him severely for that, he was ill for several days..."

Danger felt Remus throttling back a growl. If he wasn't already dead...

“Quirrell would have been far more successful... he planned to curse your broomstick itself, throwing you to your death... but something stopped him, a sort of wild magic which struck him down...”

That must have been me – that one shot did go partway through!

“To Lockhart’s credit, he was able to save me time and trouble by obtaining the secret of how to get past the three-headed dog... but I value bravery, and any man who cannot face his own fears cannot serve me... I killed him when he ran from the boggart... so it is Quirrell who has won this contest...”

Danger repressed a snarl of her own, feeling the magic swirling in her, demanding to be used. Why are we just standing here?

Because from the sound of his voice, Voldemort’s facing us – if we just came running through, he’d see us and take us out – we need to wait until he’s distracted.

“I gain strength from unicorn blood... my faithful Quirrell creeps out to the Forest to drink it for me... you saw him, did you not? But to be restored to my body would take far stronger magic... such as the Elixir of Life ... So why don’t you hand over the Sorcerer’s Stone you have in your pocket?”

A sound of footsteps, of someone stumbling over a stone floor.

“Don’t be foolish,” snarled Voldemort’s voice. “Join me and save your own life... or you’ll end up like your parents... on their knees, begging for mercy, that was how they died...”

“LIAR!” shouted Harry.

Danger closed her eyes, using every ounce of her will to keep her magic, and herself, where they were – it’s not time yet – not yet – I’ll only get myself killed if I do anything now, it’s not time yet...

More footsteps echoed in the room beyond the flames. “Touching,” hissed Voldemort, with a hint of laughter in his tone. “Such courage... like your parents... yes, they were brave enough... your father put up

a courageous fight... I killed him first... but I might have let your mother live, if she hadn't tried to protect you... Now, unless you want her death to have been in vain, hand over the Stone."

"NEVER!" There was the sound of someone running toward the door –

"SEIZE HIM!" screamed Voldemort, and Harry yelled, as did Quirrell –

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again – there was the sound of a scuffle, and then Quirrell began to scream in pain.

"Master, I cannot hold him – my hands – my hands!"

"Then kill him, fool, and be done with it!" screeched Voldemort.

NOW!

Remus charged through the flames, into the room, roaring. Danger followed, just in time to see Remus knock Quirrell off Harry – lion and man rolled over on the ground, grappling, and Quirrell's robes fell away from his leg so that Danger could see the marks there – the not quite healed wounds inflicted by the lion's claws in the Forest –

Quirrell gestured, and Remus was thrown backwards across the room to crash into the wall.

His mind's touch vanished.

Danger howled with the shock but maintained control by a hair as Quirrell whirled to face her – no, it was Voldemort who was facing her, the back of Quirrell's head was marred by a horrible paper-white face with slits for nostrils and red eyes – Quirrell's own face was red and burned, as were his hands –

One of those hands made a throwing motion towards her, and Danger leapt out of the way, snarling. Her return bolt, of pure fire, was deflected back towards her, and she turned human in time to roll out of the way –

Quirrell screamed again as Harry leapt on him, wrapping both hands around his arm and hanging on determinedly, even though his own screams joined Quirrell's – touching the man seemed to cause him agony –

Luna's voice echoed in Danger's mind.

"You can have too much of anything. Even control."

Her own voice joined it.

"If it had gotten out of control... it would have saved Harry from Voldemort – I don't know what else it would have done, but it would have done that."

Time to find out.

"GO TO HELL!" Danger screamed at Quirrell, at Voldemort, and let go of her magic.

It flooded out of her – and seemed to take her with it. Her control was gone, but at the same time, she was more in control than she had ever been. The magic answered to her hand – but that hand was ready to do what it had never done before. She was wolf, she was human, she was lion – she was fire and wind and destruction – she was a million things, but one above all.

She was Death.

Quirrell had time for one scream before the flames enveloped him.

When they were gone, not even ashes were left.

Harry collapsed to the floor like a puppet with cut strings.

Danger gasped for breath as the reality of what she'd just done struck her like a physical blow.

I killed. I killed a man. I killed another human being...

She screamed herself, falling to the floor and howling in horror and confusion and grief, not sure what form she was in or even if she was in any form at all, only knowing that she had killed another person, and nothing would ever be the same.

Remus came awake to a horrible wailing noise, made worse by the fact that he was receiving it in two ways – through his ears and his mind both.

Something's wrong.

He opened his eyes and tried to get up, but was handicapped by the fact that his right knee didn't want to hold his weight. Danger lay on the floor – the wailing was coming from her –

Obviously, since I can hear it mentally as well as physically. But she isn't physically hurt...

Harry lay crumpled on the floor as well, so very still that there was one terrible moment when Remus feared for his Pack-son's life. Then, with a rush of relief, he saw Harry's chest rise and fall.

There was no sign of Quirrell.

Gently, Remus touched Danger's mind. It was a maelstrom of emotion, threatening to tear his control apart as it had torn hers, to draw him into it rather than him drawing her out –

I need to know what happened. Show me.

The last few moments played themselves out for him, and he began to understand what had her so very upset.

She's never killed anyone – never even thought of it as a possibility –

From the day he'd been bitten, Remus' parents had drilled into him that if he wasn't careful, he might kill people. He had grown up knowing it was possible for one human to kill another, and specifically, for him to be the killer. Danger, it seemed, had been sheltered from this.

Most people are.

But now she's killed – killed in defense of an innocent and of her own life, but she's still killed.

We're going to have to deal with this.

He rolled over to sit on one hip, then pushed himself along the stone floor until he was beside Harry. He rearranged the boy into a more comfortable position, felt the lump in his pocket and decided to leave it where it was, conjured a pillow under his head, and gently stroked his hair. "This is probably the stupidest thing you've ever done," he told Harry. "But I can't really be too angry with you – not with what you stopped from happening."

He heard the sobbing behind him begin to fade.

"You know, Harry," he went on conversationally, "it's a big decision, to end a human life. To kill another person. But sometimes the biggest decisions in life are the ones we have to make the fastest. And they're almost always the ones where we wish there was another way."

The noise of Danger's crying was almost completely gone now.

"I've never killed anyone myself. But if it was a choice between someone I loved and someone who was trying to hurt that person, I know what I would do. And I might regret it later – but I would regret not doing it much, much more."

He could hear paws on the floor behind him.

"And of course, there are some big decisions where I don't wish there had been another way. Like deciding to love someone. I can't think of one person in my life I regret loving." Remus stopped. "Well, maybe Peter. But... no, not even him. Not even with everything he did. I don't regret loving him like a friend."

A cold nose was thrust under his left hand. He did not flinch. And don't think for one instant that I'm about to stop loving you, he said instead.

Danger lay down, her head resting on his good leg, and looked up at him with misery plain in her eyes. Remus lowered his hand and began to stroke her head.

Don't we usually do this the other way around? said a small, shaky voice in his mind.

Do us good to shake things up a bit. Remus smiled down at her.

Danger's wolf features blurred, and she was human again, tears sliding from her eyes. I killed a man, Remus. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

In this case, it means that Harry and you and I are alive, and that an evil tyrant has been stopped from returning to power.

But –

Remus opened his mind to her and let her see what he was feeling – how proud he was of her strength and her ability, that he wasn't in the least angry with her – that he was a bit angry with himself for rushing in and getting himself knocked out, so that he hadn't been able to help her – that, in his opinion, she had done the only thing she could have – and slowly, little by little, he felt her relaxing against him.

Thank you, she sent after a little while.

You're welcome.

They were together. They were alive. It was enough.
(A/N: Ta-da!

So, how you like? Good? Bad? Let me know! Review! And tell me what you think about remote controls. Do you hog them? Do you hide them? Do you put them in a plastic bag?

Disclaimer: The last five lines of the Harry/Voldemort dialogue are direct quotes from PS/SS. Everything else is paraphrase, or ought to be. If it isn't, let me know... basically, if JKR wrote it, I didn't!)

Chapter 18: As Soon As We Can

Some time later – Remus wasn't sure if it was a long or a short time – he looked up as the black flames in the doorway of the room ceased. Albus Dumbledore entered the room, with Sirius close behind him.

"It was Quirrell," said Remus quietly, so as not to awaken Danger, in response to Dumbledore's questioning look. "He's dead."

"And you?"

"Harry got knocked out, something's wrong with my knee, and Danger just needs to be taken care of for a while."

Dumbledore nodded. "The Stone?"

"In Harry's pocket." Remus slid his hand into said pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone, about the size of his palm, which he handed to Dumbledore, who slid it carefully into an inner pocket of his own.

"Is she asleep?" asked Sirius in amazement, looking over at Danger.

"Well, not now I'm not," answered Danger waspishly, her eyes opening. "Didn't anyone ever tell you it's not polite to talk loud around sleeping people?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's not normal to fall asleep right after you fight with an evil Dark Lord?"

"Who wants to be normal?"

Sirius conjured a stretcher under Harry, Danger got to her feet, and they walked out of the room together, arguing as they went. Dumbledore watched them go, shaking his head, then helped Remus to his feet and supported him back through the chambers, now devoid of their special accoutrements.

"When you are able," said Dumbledore quietly to Remus as they mounted brooms at the bottom of the shaft, "I would like a few words with you."

“Of course.”

They flew upwards and out of the trapdoor, greatly puzzling Fluffy, who even forgot to bark until they were out of his reach. Once out of the room, Remus was about to land and dismount, but Dumbledore waved him onward.

“I seem to recall a certain quartet of young gentlemen whose stated goal it was to have the school rules amended so that riding broomsticks in the hallways would be permissible,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “This once, I believe the rule can be bent.”

Remus chuckled and directed his broom down the hallway. It was an exercise in precision flying, but he made it to the hospital wing without crashing into anything too badly. Sirius and Danger were already there with Harry, as well as Aletha and the other cubs – even Meghan, who must have come with –

Molly Weasley. Who no sooner saw him than she ran to him and embraced him, nearly pulling him off the broomstick.

“Thank you,” she said fervently, looking him in the eye, something she hadn’t done for months. “For what you did for Ron – I looked at the clock as soon as you’d gone, his hand was on ‘mortal peril’, I might not have noticed it for hours – and Sirius told me how you saved him – thank you so much. I’ve been wrong. Forgive me?”

“Of course.”

It’s about bloody time, said a caustic voice.

Not everyone can be you, dear heart. And Molly’s friendship is worth a little wait.

You are aware that you’re so patient and forbearing it’s ridiculous?

And here I thought you liked it.

Aren’t I allowed to like it and still think it’s ridiculous?

If you insist.

“Off that thing immediately,” ordered Madam Pomfrey, coming out from behind the screens that now masked the bed with Harry in it. “What’s the matter with you, then?”

“My right knee had a disagreement with a wall.” Remus lowered the broomstick enough so that he could transfer himself from it to the bed, then pulled his robes aside to display the afflicted part.

Madam Pomfrey poked at it for a moment, her hands gentler than they looked, then sent Meghan off for two potions from her office and conjured bandages with her wand. One of the potions was poured onto the bandages, which were then affixed to the knee, and Remus was handed a gobletful of the other with instructions to drink it all and not go making faces about the taste.

It’s not quite as bad as the Wolfsbane, he reported when he’d finished it. But I still wish there was some way to make pain relievers taste better.

To quote a certain little Pack-daughter, “If it didn’t taste horrible, how would you know it was a potion?”

Madam Pomfrey bustled behind another screened-off bed at the end of the ward, which Remus assumed contained Ron, since Molly Weasley had disappeared behind it a few moments before, and he didn’t see the redheaded boy anywhere else. Meghan too vanished behind the screens, following Madam Pomfrey as devotedly as any acolyte behind her priest.

Draco would have been in danger of falling off his bed if he hadn’t been so firmly pressed against the side of the huge black dog sharing it with him. His eyes were closed, and his hand was running along the dog’s side over and over, as if he were hypnotized or under Imperius to do only that. As Remus watched, Sirius lifted his head and gave Draco’s ear a gentle lick.

One bed over, Aletha sang softly to Hermione, carefully running a comb through the girl's tangled hair. When she struck a snarl, she untangled it bit by bit instead of yanking at it as Hermione herself often did. The song was one of Aletha's own compositions, written for a restless Neenie who had hated to have her hair combed and would only hold still if the funny song were being sung to her.

Good. Wonderful. Thank you, Sirius, thank you, Letha. This is what a Pack should be – you're taking care of the cubs, because Danger and I can't right now.

And while I'm on that subject...

Remus flexed his knee, discovered it would take his weight, and made his way cautiously over to Danger's bed, where she was lying curled up on her side, knees drawn up to her chest. Is there room for me?

I might be able to find some. Danger uncoiled and rolled over, looking up at him. How's your knee?

Better – it'll probably be healed by morning. Remus sat down on the edge of the bed, kicked his shoes off, and swung his legs up onto it, facing Danger. How are you?

I... don't know. Her hand sought and found his. I have this awful feeling I'm still in shock, and it's going to be worse tomorrow.

Very likely. Do you want to sleep?

Again, I don't know. But yes, probably. Will you stay with me?

I always do, unless you specifically tell me to go away and start mentally smacking me to back it up. Remus turned himself around and lay down beside her, sliding an arm under her shoulders.

I did not do that.

Oh really? Who was it shooing me off to the Quidditch victory party even though she'd been unconscious a few minutes before?

I didn't smack you.

Yes, you did.

No, I didn't.

Yes, you did.

No, I didn't. It was a gentle shove, not a smack.

So you admit you did something.

I've never denied it.

Yes, you have.

No, I haven't.

Yes, you have.

No, I... what was that?

What?

I thought I heard something...

The cub lay alone in the darkness. His head hurt terribly, and he wanted to howl with the pain, but he dared not make a sound. Any sound might tell the slayer where he was.

The slayer hated all wolves and wanted them dead. He had killed the cub's own sire and dam, long ago, and would gladly have killed the cub as well. The cub couldn't remember why he had gone out to fight with the slayer – there must have been a reason, an important reason, or he would not have gone – but he wished that he had not. The slayer had hurt him, but he had managed to hurt the slayer as well, and then...

He remembered the sounds of a battle. The alpha male and female of his Pack had come, had taken the slayer's attention from him and focused it on themselves, forcing the slayer to fight them rather than their cub. The cub thought he must have run away while the battle was going on, since he could not remember how he had come to this dark place, or where it was, or what had happened to him.

A sudden fear struck into him. What if the slayer had won the battle? What if the darkness in which he lay was the darkness of a cage?

Caged wolves went mad, the cub knew. They lost their knowledge of their Pack and their Den, they forgot all that made them who they were, and at the end they tore at themselves in their wild rage, wishing only for death to end their misery. They would strike down even their Packmates if they met them, for no scent, no sound could reach through the madness to tell them that this was a friend and not an enemy.

The cub whined under his breath. More than anything, he wanted to be back in his Den, surrounded by his Pack, playing with his littermates, learning from the adults how to stalk and hunt for prey, how to sleep all day and sing to the moon at night. The Den was sometimes dark, but it was a friendly darkness, safe and known, where there was nothing which was not there in the light. This darkness was hostile and frightening, pressing on him all around, as if it wanted him to be trapped in it and never return to his Pack.

I must be caged, he thought despairingly. I must be caged, and this is the beginning of the madness.

His fear overcame his caution, and he whimpered as if he were still so very small that his eyes were not yet open, begging his dam to come to him, to bring him warmth and life and a scent that he knew...
Harry!

Danger was off the bed and around the screen so fast Remus could have sworn he saw smoke. He got to his feet as quickly as he could himself, swearing silently at the restriction of his injury as the rest of the Pack flooded past him. Harry's wordless cries were now clearly

audible, and the boy sounded terrified... but of what, Remus wondered?

He finally made it around the end of the screen to see Harry twisting in his bed, moaning, with Madam Pomfrey running her wand over him, doing some sort of diagnostic spell, and the rest of the Pack standing all around the bed, the cubs looking frightened and worried, the adults worried and frustrated.

"There's nothing wrong with him that I can tell," said Madam Pomfrey finally, shaking her head. "With the stress put on his system, he should still be unconscious—"

"But obviously, he's not," interrupted Aletha. "Poppy – may we try?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "Do your best not to make it worse, though," she said with a slightly ironic twist to her mouth.

Aletha was kneeling beside Harry in an instant, capturing the thrashing hands between her own and calling his name in a quiet voice. "Harry... Harry... Harry, listen to me. Everything is all right. You're safe now."

Harry's whole body stiffened for an instant as if in surprise, then relaxed somewhat, although he was still making odd little noises – he sounded like a puppy, Remus realized, like a frightened puppy.

"That's enough, now," said Sirius soothingly, coming to stand beside Aletha and stroking Harry's hair. "That's enough of that. You're all right now. It's all right, Greeneyes..."

Harry's head turned suddenly, so that his face was against Sirius' hand. Sirius didn't remove his hand, and after a moment Harry sighed and relaxed a bit more, turning his face back the way it had been.

"On the bed, you three," instructed Aletha quietly without taking her eyes from Harry. "Find room."

The cubs obeyed with alacrity. Hermione lay next to Harry as they had done when they were toddlers, black hair and brown spread out

on the same pillow. Meghan draped herself across their legs, and Draco curled up at their feet, lifting his head to glare at Hermione. "Kick me and..." He stopped suddenly.

"And what?" asked Hermione.

"I'll kick you back."

Why do I have a feeling he was about to say "you're dead"? inquired Danger, the corners of her mouth turning up, but only the smallest iota of humor in her tone.

This night has changed us all. Even with magic, there's no way to undo what happened tonight. Remus looked back at Harry, who was no longer thrashing but still seemed a trifle unsettled. But I think we'll be all right eventually.

"Is he going to be all right?" asked Molly worriedly, coming over from Ron's bed, where Remus could see the red-haired boy either still unconscious or asleep.

"I think so." Remus smiled to himself at the unintended repetition of his conversation with Danger. "Eventually."

"Remus," said Aletha, her eyes still fixed on Harry. "Danger. Come here. Touch him, say something to him, let him know you're here. He won't rest until he knows we're all safe."

Our young alpha. Good for him.

Danger reached across Hermione to stroke Harry's face, and he turned towards her touch with a little whine. "I'm here, little wolf," she said quietly. "Everything's going to be all right."

Remus joined her, first pressing Draco's shoulder and taking Hermione's hand in his own. He laid his other hand on Harry's head. "You fought bravely, Harry," he said softly. "Rest now and heal." The last of the fear drained away from the cub. His alpha would not lie to him. It must be safe to rest here.

He could feel his littermates around him, could scent the adults of the Pack not far away. Their voices and their scents and their touch had soothed his fears away, had told him silently that the battle had been won. The slayer, for this day at least, was defeated.

The darkness claimed him again, but this time he did not resist. It was not the darkness of a cage, which would mock and madden him, but the darkness of the Den, where he might lie safely to rest and heal, as his alpha had instructed.

All was well in his world.

The Pack stayed the night at Hogwarts, using one of the guest suites and denning on the floor of the living area, Draco and Hermione allowed to stay with their family on this special night. There were tears and worries about Harry, but Aletha was firm in her assertion that he would be all right once he'd had some time to rest, and her confidence slowly seeped through the rest of the Pack. Less easy to deal with was the cubs' quiet horror at having seen a dead man, which Remus suspected might be a long time healing, but eventually everyone slept.

Hermione woke once with a nightmare, which Remus dealt with by giving her a late night lion-ride through the rest of the suite. "Like Susan and Lucy," she said when they were finished. "Did Danger really scream when you did it to her?"

"She wasn't expecting it, so you can't blame her, and you're not to tell her I told you this – but yes, she did."

Hermione giggled.

In the morning, after everyone had breakfasted, the cubs went off to find their friends, and the adults made their way up to Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore himself was not in at the moment, the portraits told them, but had said to say he would be back in a few minutes. Sirius and Phineas Nigellus soon engaged one another in a verbal sparring match which kept everyone entertained until the Headmaster returned.

“Have you broken your fast, or would you care for refreshment?” he asked, chuckling at Phineas’ last quip, which had Aletha and Remus laughing heartily and Sirius blushing, and even Danger had cracked a smile.

“I can always handle a cup of tea, Professor,” said Aletha, wiping her eyes.

“That brings up the first issue I wish to speak with you about,” said Dumbledore, ringing a small silver bell on the corner of his desk. “But in a moment.”

Dobby appeared and took drink orders from everyone. “Is Harry Potter going to be all right, ma’am?” he asked Aletha anxiously.

“We’re not sure, Dobby, but we think he’ll be all right once he’s had a chance to rest.”

Dobby smiled and nodded vigorously. “If Mrs. Freeman-Black says so, Dobby believes it. Dobby will be back in a minute.” He vanished.

“Are all house-elves this strange?” Aletha asked Sirius.

“You’re asking the wrong man – I hated our house-elf, and the feeling was mutual. You remember him from Grimmauld Place, Kreacher – disgusting little thing, I always secretly wanted to see if he’d fit down the toilet... I’m sorry, Professor, you had something you wanted to tell us.”

“Not exactly something to tell you, Sirius, this is more along the lines of a request.” Dumbledore sat back in his chair. “Over the course of my life, I have found one thing harder to come by than any other, and that is a true and loyal friend. I count myself lucky in these, my waning years, to have found not one but four. You have all of you earned the right, many times over, to address me as Minerva does.” He smiled suddenly. “And I do wish you would avail yourselves of it – I get quite enough of being called ‘Headmaster’ and ‘Professor’ by the students.”

Sirius closed his mouth. "This is going to be a hard one," he said to no one in particular. "I still get the urge to call Minerva 'Professor' half the time – give me a little while to get used to this, sir – Albus?"

"There, you did it quite nicely," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "In three or four years, you may even do it without thinking about it." His smile was replaced with a more somber expression. "But there are other things we must discuss. Such as questions Harry is likely to ask when he awakes, and what answers you will provide for him."

Later that day, Danger found herself wandering outside without really thinking about where she was going. The grounds were full of students celebrating the end of term and freedom from exams, but she ignored them, and apart from a few curious looks, they ignored her. She wandered down to the lake and sat on the lawn near the shore, recalling another time when she had seen the lake blue like this, the green lawn, the castle rising majestically –

They gave me these powers. To protect the ones I love, they said. But if that protection takes the shape of death...

She was on her feet, running, but it didn't matter. She couldn't run fast enough or far enough to escape the memory. Quirrell, screaming as the fire burned his life away. As she killed him.

I understand Lady Macbeth much better now. "What, will these hands ne'er be clean? Yet here's a spot. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand..."

She didn't really come back to herself until she was curled up under a tree on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest, head on her knees and tears soaking her robes, shaking with her sobs.

"Yeh all right there?" asked a rough voice.

Danger turned to see Hagrid looking at her with concern. "You look awful," she remarked shakily.

Hagrid grimaced. "Feel awful. Bin up ter the castle – got a potion ter help bring my memories back – an' it turns out I did tell Lockhart how

ter get past Fluffy. Drew me out, he did, flatterin' me." He growled slightly, pounding a massive fist into his other hand. "If he weren't already dead..."

Danger smiled in spite of herself. "Remus said the same thing." She rummaged in her pocket. "Oh, botheration, I've lost my handkerchief..."

Hagrid offered her his, and she took it with a nod of thanks. It was enormous and coarsely woven, rough on her face, but it dried her tears. She looked Hagrid over as she handed it back. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have you ever... killed anyone?"

Hagrid sat down beside her. "I have," he said solemnly. "Just once. Durin' the first war, it was. We were tryin' ter stop a load o' Death Eaters playing their damn games with a busload o' Muggle kids." He scowled. "I got a hold on one of 'em. Big feller, he was, an' fast with his wand. I busted it first thing, then I got my hands 'round his neck..." He stopped, looking at the ground. "He was dead pretty quick. Guess I didn't know me own strength then. Least not well's I do now."

"I'm sorry," said Danger, looking up at Hagrid – even had she been standing, looking up would still have been necessary. "About last night. I shouldn't have said those things to you."

"'m sorry meself," said Hagrid, meeting her gaze. There was honest pain in the black eyes – Danger knew as few people did how deeply Hagrid cared about the cubs. "That was ruddy stupid. Blurtin' it out like that. They could've been killed – all of 'em – and it would've been my fault..."

He looked away from her, up towards the castle. "I saw Harry," he said quietly. "In hospital. Looks right bad, he does. All pale an' lying so still, him that's always so full o' life. Madam Pomfrey chased me out before I got a chance ter ask – do yeh know anythin' yet? Will he be all right?"

“Aletha says he just needs rest, and I trust her judgment. I think the real crisis was last night, and he pulled through. So he just needs to recover.”

“Do yeh really believe that?”

Danger sniffled. “I don’t know.”

Crying on Hagrid’s shoulder wasn’t much like crying on anyone else’s, Danger reflected. For one thing, you would have to stand on your tiptoes to reach his actual shoulder, so it was more crying on his chest. And his idea of a reassuring pat on the back tended to knock the wind out of ordinary people.

Still, he was doing his best. Just like everyone else.

“Are you going to sleep your life away?” inquired a voice in Harry’s ear.

He groaned and rolled over. It didn’t help, as the voice continued in the other ear. “Two full nights and days is enough for anyone to sleep when it is not winter, heart’s egg. Up with you, now.”

“But I don’t want to.”

There was a small shriek nearby. Harry’s eyes flew open.

Two or three blurry figures were moving around. He blinked once or twice, then realized he didn’t have his glasses on. Before he could start looking for them, someone had handed them to him. He put them on and looked up to see Padfoot.

“We were starting to think you’d never wake up,” said his godfather lightly, but Harry could see worry lines on the man’s face. “How do you feel?”

“All right—” Harry sat up suddenly, making Padfoot jump a little. “What happened to the Stone? It was Quirrell – and Voldemort – did he get it?”

“Everything’s all right, Harry, no need to panic – Madam Pomfrey’s under enough stress at the moment, since it seems no one told her about that particular ability of yours.” Padfoot indicated Siss, who was coiled up on Harry’s pillow looking smug. “It seems Draco was right. He was the one who suggested bringing Siss down here to see you – although Ron says it was just to get her out of the dorm, she was starting to nip the other boys.”

“Siss, you didn’t...”

The snake gave the serpentine wriggle that equated to a human shrug. “I was worried about you.”

“That’s still not nice.”

“It got me what I wanted.”

Harry sighed. “What do you call it when somebody doesn’t care what they do as long as it gets them what they want?”

“Ruthless?” suggested Padfoot, sitting down in the chair by the bed. “Egocentric?”

“I like the second one better.” Harry looked down at Siss. “You’re egocentric,” he said.

Siss flicked her tongue out at him in a human gesture she’d picked up. “I would be more offended if I thought you knew what that word meant.”

Harry laughed. “So what happened?” he asked, looking back up. “Where’s everyone else? Are they all right? Draco was having trouble breathing after he beat the boggart, he said he’d wait in the key chamber so he wouldn’t slow us down – and Ron got hit pretty hard by the white queen – I don’t think Hermione got hurt at all, did she?”

“No, she’s fine. They’re all fine now, Draco just had a cracked rib, and Ron a mild concussion – and after hearing what Draco and Hermione had to say about what you four – five, I can’t forget Neville – what you five figured out about Halloween, Poppy tried him on a dose of

Memorare Potion, and it worked perfectly. They said you'd recovered your memories on your own – is that true?"

"I think so," said Harry, closing his eyes for a moment. "Yes. It feels a little fuzzy still – like I watched a movie of it instead of doing it – but I remember."

Padfoot nodded slowly. "You are aware that's supposedly impossible? Breaking a Memory Charm from the inside?"

"Surviving the Killing Curse was supposed to be impossible too," retorted Harry, tapping his forehead. "I ought to be a superhero. Impossible Boy."

"You are impossible," said Padfoot, shoving him affectionately down onto the bed. "And you practically are a superhero. What you did was probably the dumbest, and the bravest, thing you could have – and it worked. Quirrell and Lockhart are both dead, Voldemort is, as far as we can tell, gone, and the Sorcerer's Stone has been destroyed."

Harry sat up again. "Destroyed? But – what about Nicolas Flamel?"

"Well, that's a bit of a long story—"

"I want to know."

"Manners," said Letha acidly, coming around the screen. "Just because you've just woken up and we're all over the moon that you didn't manage to get your fool self killed, doesn't mean you can go around being rude, Harry James Potter."

Harry would have been more convinced if he hadn't been able to see tears in her eyes. She hugged him once, hard, then sat down in the chair on the other side of the bed from Padfoot.

"Please, will you tell me what Nicolas Flamel is going to do if the Sorcerer's Stone has been destroyed," said Harry politely.

Letha nodded. "Much better. Harry, Nicolas Flamel is almost seven hundred years old. You can do an awful lot of living in seven hundred

years. And you can get very tired... what was that phrase Albus used, Sirius?"

"Like going to bed after a very, very long day," recited Padfoot.

"He's going to die, then."

"Yes. He and his wife Perenelle are going to die."

"But – why?"

"It's hard to explain, Harry," said Padfoot slowly. "I think you have to grow into some of this – I know you're going to hate hearing this, but you're really too young to understand some of it. But tell me this. Are there things worth dying for?"

Harry nodded.

"Nicolas Flamel feels that he would rather die," Letha took over, "than see his Sorcerer's Stone, which took him his whole life to make – or what would have been his whole life – in Voldemort's hands. Even the safest place in the wizarding world didn't turn out to be safe enough. So instead of keeping it and taking the risk that Voldemort would take it and use it to return to power – to become the strongest and worst Dark wizard ever – he's destroyed it. Even though that means he has to die himself."

"I... guess I understand," said Harry. "Sort of." Something occurred to him. "What happened to Quirrell? I mean, why couldn't he touch me – and what happened to him at the end? All I remember is holding onto his arm, he was screaming, my head was hurting more and more and more, and then Danger yelled something and there was this big bright light..."

"That's more of two separate questions," said Padfoot, "and we're really not qualified to answer them, since we weren't there. But someone who was is on her way..."

Danger skidded around the end of the screen and visibly restrained herself from jumping onto Harry's bed. "Thank God you're all right,"

she said a bit hoarsely into his ear, hugging him tightly instead. “If you’d been hurt any worse – but you’re not, you’re going to be fine, you understand me? You’re not allowed to be ill any more after tomorrow – it’s already got half the school in an uproar–”

“What does?”

“Harry, do you know what day it is?” asked Letha.

“No. Not really. Why–” Harry looked out the window at the late afternoon sunlight and had a horrid realization. “I’ve missed the last Quidditch match, haven’t I.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Danger. “It was yesterday. Gryffindor had to forfeit, since they couldn’t field a Seeker, but at least that means no one else gets any more points over you.”

Harry nodded sadly. “We’re in last place as it is.” He noticed Padfoot wink at Letha, and was about to ask about it, but Moony came around the screen at that moment and claimed his attention and a hug.

“Harry was just asking why Quirrell couldn’t touch him,” said Padfoot when the adults were all seated.

“Couldn’t touch him?” repeated Moony with a slight frown. “Harry, you’re going to have to fill us in on a few things. What went on down there after Hermione left?”

Harry told them the story, as best as he remembered it – the shock of discovering that Quirrell, as well as Lockhart, had been working for Voldemort; Quirrell trying to use him, Harry, to get the Stone out of the Mirror of Erised; and Harry’s success – “Why did that work?” Harry asked, interrupting himself. “I mean, how could I get it, and not him?”

“We’ll tell you later – go on,” said Padfoot, who looked enthralled. Harry grinned to himself and continued, though there wasn’t much more to tell, since Moony and Danger had overheard most of his conversation with Voldemort.

“But when he tried to touch me, something happened,” Harry wound up. “He tried to choke me, and his hands got all burned-looking – I grabbed his face, and it happened there too. Then you came in, Moony, and knocked him off me, and he threw you across the room–”

“That goes on my list of lifetime stupid moments,” said Moony with a rueful smile. “I was thinking, ‘You idiot, he did this to Sirius in the Forest, why couldn’t you have remembered!’”

Harry laughed with everyone else. “Then he started trying to hurt you, Danger, and I realized if I hurt him he couldn’t hurt you, so I did. I grabbed his arm and held on, and it made my scar hurt a lot – I guess that was being close to Voldemort like that – but it hurt him too. And then you shouted,” he said to Danger, “and there was a lot of light – and that’s all I remember, until waking up here.”

Danger shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

“We’ll cover what that was in a minute,” said Moony. “Harry, I can’t be certain what caused that, but I can make an educated guess – do you want to hear it?”

“Yes.”

“I think it may well have been your mother’s sacrifice that did it. She loved you enough to die for you, and that love was so strong that it’s stayed with you all this time – it will probably stay with you all your life. She wanted to protect you so much that her protection continues even now, so much so that anything as evil as Voldemort simply can’t touch you.”

Harry pressed a hand to his chest, feeling the Pack-pendants under his palm, thinking of the wedding rings he had sacrificed to make them, and of the tiger shape on them, which was reared up as if striking at something, and the stag, head lifted proudly... the parents he had never known, except through pictures and stories, and all because of one man...

“Why did Voldemort want to kill me?” he asked.

The looks the Pack-parents traded were laced with – was it alarm? Harry frowned.

“This is one of those questions I’m afraid I was hoping you’d never ask,” said Padfoot finally. “Harry, we can’t tell you that. At least, not today. But please trust us – we will tell you. As soon as we can.”

Harry considered arguing, then let it go. The Pack was usually good about keeping promises like that. “What happened to Voldemort?” he asked instead. “He’s not dead, is he?”

“No, I doubt it,” said Letha. “Since he’s not exactly alive at the moment, he can’t be killed. So he’s probably still out there somewhere, waiting for another chance.”

“Another chance at what?” asked Harry, confused. “The Stone’s been destroyed.”

“There’s a lot of Dark magic out there, Harry.” Moony looked grave. “And Voldemort knows a great deal about it. He’ll keep trying to return to power until he either succeeds or is destroyed.”

“And... will he still want to kill me? You don’t have to answer if you can’t,” Harry said quickly. “But I kind of want to know.”

Padfoot nodded, his eyes shadowed. “Yes, Greeneyes, I’m afraid so. Voldemort’s not the forgiving type.”

“But we’ll be here to help and protect you,” said Letha decisively. “Until the day you can fight on your own, and then we’ll fight beside you.”

Harry smiled, liking that image.

“You asked about getting the Stone out of the Mirror,” said Danger. “Dumbledore set that up – he’s rather proud of how he did it. He set the enchantment so that what the person saw in the Mirror triggered whether or not they got the Stone. Only a person who wanted to find it, but not use it, could get it. So you counted, since all you wanted to

do was keep it away from Voldemort. Quirrell was probably hoping for a little taste of that immortality himself.”

“But now he’s dead,” said Harry.

Danger jumped a little. “Yes. That’s true – how did you know?”

“Padfoot told me.”

Danger glared at Padfoot.

“He was all worried about the Stone – what was I supposed to tell him?” Padfoot raised his hands in mock-surrender. “Don’t kill me, lady, please, I got a wife and kids...”

“Sirius!” snapped Moony as Danger turned away.

“Oh, Merlin, I didn’t think – I’m sorry.” Padfoot looked pained. “Me and my big mouth...”

The bottom suddenly dropped out of Harry’s stomach as he remembered Quirrell screaming in pain. He looked down at his hands, then back up at his Pack-parents. “Was it – me?”

“Was what you?” asked Letha.

“Did I – kill him?”

“No,” said Letha quickly, covering his hand with her own and squeezing it reassuringly. “No, Harry, you didn’t kill him. You defended yourself, and you did it well.”

“Then... how did he die?”

Letha looked at Danger, who had turned back around, tear-marks tracking her cheeks. Padfoot and Moony were looking at her as well, Harry noticed. Suspicion began to grow in him.

“I did it, Harry,” said Danger very quietly. “I killed Professor Quirrell.”

Harry nodded, his suspicion confirmed. "You burned him," he said. "The light I saw was the fire."

Danger nodded mutely.

Harry gulped.

"I understand only a little human speech," said Siss, winding her way onto his lap and making him jump, "but the flat one has taught me some more words, and the word with all the hard edges is one. Do I understand correctly, that your dam with the brown head-fur killed a predator who sought your life?"

"Yes, that's right," said Harry, seizing on the snake as a polite reason not to meet Danger's eyes at the moment.

"And that you were frightened at the thought that you might have destroyed this predator yourself?"

"I guess so... Siss, what am I supposed to do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"She killed someone, Siss! I think... this is stupid, but I think I'm scared of her! What am I supposed to do?"

"I believe I can help. Will you convey a message to her for me?"

"Er... all right."

"You must promise one thing – to speak it in human-speech as quickly as I do in this language, without thinking overmuch about it. You will understand when we are finished. Will you promise?"

"I promise." Harry looked up. "Siss says she has something she wants to tell you," he told Danger.

"I'm listening."

Siss began to speak in Parseltongue, and as she had requested, Harry translated without thinking too much about it, and listened to himself talk. "She says, thank you for killing the predator who wanted to kill me. She knows it wasn't easy for you, because mothers want to protect life, not end it, but she says thank you for doing it so I didn't have to, because eggings grow up too soon anyway, and she hates to think of me needing to kill so young..." Harry stopped, and not just because Siss' message was finished, although it was. Mentally, he was kicking himself.

She didn't want to kill him. She would rather almost anything else. But she didn't want me to die, and she didn't want me to have to kill him. So she did it herself – she did it so I didn't have to...

Harry launched himself out of the bed and into Danger's arms. "Thank you," he whispered to her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Danger whispered back, her voice catching.

A few blurry minutes passed, involving a lot of tears and hugging, until Harry found himself back in his bed, laughing at some stupid joke Padfoot had cracked, watching Moony and Danger tease each other, listening to Letha's stories about what had been happening with the other cubs, and he discovered he was happy.

Everything's going to be all right now.

His own Pack came to visit him later that day – Hermione and Meghan hugged him so tight he couldn't breathe, and Ron, Draco, and Neville were all grinning enormously as they shook his hand hard.

"We were worried, mate," explained Ron. "Everyone's been on edge ever since it happened – and then Siss started biting people – Dean's got a blister on his heel where she nailed him."

"I thought she might be worried about you," said Draco. "So I got Meghan to bring her down and put her in beside you – they haven't let any of the rest of us in, just the Pack-parents and her."

“That’s because Madam Pomfrey can trust me to behave myself around a very sick person,” said Meghan with dignity.

“Oh, you behave yourself, do you?” asked Hermione. “And who was it painted all my clothes with pudding one year at Christmas?”

“You weren’t sick then.”

“Exam results are in,” said Draco, distracting the girls with the ease of long practice. “I brought yours with me – here they are.”

Harry accepted the parchment and looked the grades over. “Are you sure these are mine and not yours?” he said in surprise.

“Says ‘Harry Potter’ at the top. Why?”

“They’re... good.”

“Oh, stop being so modest,” said Hermione. “You’ve passed everything, and done well, that’s what’s important.”

“This from the head of the class,” grumbled Ron, making Hermione turn a faint pink.

“How did everyone else do?” asked Harry.

“I passed Potions,” Neville volunteered. “One point above failing.”

“Better than one point below,” said Meghan practically.

Everyone laughed.

(A/N: I know I said I wouldn’t do review responses here any more, but one question/comment has come up several times. So I feel I need to address it.

Harry is doing just about as much for himself as he ever does in canon. The Pack-parents are doing, with very few exceptions, only what other types of help did for Harry in canon.

For instance: during the Quidditch match in canon, Hermione stopped Quirrell hexing the broom, and in LwoD Remus got rid of the Bludger. In the Forest, Harry is saved by Firenze in canon, and by the Pack-parents in LwoD, at the same time. And if Danger had not killed Quirrell, he would shortly have died anyway, from Harry's inflicting pain on him, or from Voldemort killing him (whichever is the actual canon explanation). Otherwise, Remus and Danger take the place of Dumbledore, who (in canon) arrived and pulled Harry off Quirrell.

So: The Pack-parents are not just showing up and pulling Harry out of trouble – or if they are, they're doing it in a canon fashion. So will you people please lay off! Grumble! ;-)

Today's review topic is fur. Interpret it how you will. And review responses – along with a “here's what you should have noticed” post, where I detail all the little clues I slipped in along the way – will be up on the Yahoo group some time tomorrow!)

Chapter 19: For Now

Harry got a good night's sleep, and felt almost normal the next morning. Letha turned up with his breakfast, and to tell him he was due to be released the next day.

"Why not today?" asked Harry grumpily. "I feel fine."

"Keep complaining and you'll stay in that bed until we levitate you down to the train, Harry Potter, and then you'll miss the end-of-year feast."

"I think I'd rather," said Harry through a mouthful of porridge. "Slytherin won the house cup, didn't they?"

"Yes, but you'll fix that next year, I'm sure." Letha gave him a severe look. "No more hexing people until you learn how to do Memory Charms on them afterwards."

Harry almost sprayed milk over his blankets.

"Speaking of Memory Charms, we've been going through Lockhart's things," said Letha, handing Harry a napkin. "It seems you and Ron and Hagrid aren't alone. He kept a journal which brags in great detail about the wizards and witches he's Obliviated over the years – usually with some incident or other from one of his books attached to the names."

"So he never really did any of those things."

"No, he never did. I doubt many people will mourn for him."

Harry made a rude noise.

"Precisely."

"Who's going to teach Defense next year, then?"

"Oh, Albus will find someone." Letha smiled knowingly.

Harry looked at his Pack-mother. "Since when d'you call him that?"

"Since a few days ago, when he asked us to. So don't even think about trying to get me in trouble with him, you little monster." Letha dipped her finger into the jam and smudged the end of Harry's nose.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly. Madam Pomfrey grudgingly allowed Harry's friends to stay in the hospital wing, on the understanding that they were not to overexcite him or make a great deal of noise. One of the Pack-parents had brought the Wizard's Monopoly set from the Den, so they played that for several hours, making illegal alliances when they got close to bankruptcy and eventually all teaming up against Ron, who still managed to hold his own for several turns until landing on "Hogsmeade", which had three broomsticks on it, the turn after he'd hit "Diagon Alley", which had a shed.

Hagrid came by as well and a bit tearfully apologized to Harry for putting him in harm's way. Harry pointed out that Hagrid couldn't have known Lockhart was working for Voldemort, shocking Hagrid out of his crying fit with the name, and after that the visit was quite pleasant. After Madam Pomfrey gave him a final checkup the next morning, Harry was allowed to leave the hospital wing. Ron turned up with Harry's day clothes and walked him back to Gryffindor Tower, which Harry wasn't sure if he found funny or annoying. "Did you think I'd forget how to get there?"

"Just thought you might want some company."

"All right."

The common room was, thankfully, nearly empty when they got there, since almost everyone else was outside. Harry and Ron went up to their dorm and started packing their trunks, which kept them busy until lunchtime.

They met the rest of their friends in the Great Hall for lunch, and Harry tried, mostly successfully, to ignore the whispers and stares he was garnering. Still, he ate quickly and returned to Gryffindor Tower

to spend the afternoon finishing his packing and relaxing with Draco and Ron, chatting about Quidditch and other topics of interest.

The whispering was worse, if anything, when Harry and the others went down to the feast that night. The room went silent as soon as they walked in, and people started standing up to look at them. Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore stood up almost as soon as they'd sat down, bringing the conversations to a halt.

"Another year finished," said Dumbledore cheerfully. "And quite a year it has been, too. I dare to hope that some of you have learned a few things over the course of our terms of learning... but you have the whole summer ahead of you in which to forget as much as you care to."

A ripple of laughter went through the school.

"I do believe the House Cup needs awarding, then," said Dumbledore, waving to the large, golden cup which stood on a stand in front of the teachers' table. "Gryffindor stands in fourth place with regards to house points, with three hundred two; Hufflepuff in third place with three hundred forty-two; Ravenclaw in second, with four hundred thirty-six; and as our decorations indicate, Slytherin House, with four hundred seventy-two points, in first place..."

He had to stop for the enormous cheers which rose from the Slytherin table. Draco rolled his eyes and Ron made a gagging noise.

"Yes, good work, Slytherin," said Dumbledore over the cheering. "However, I have a few last-minute points to award, as is my right as Headmaster."

Harry noticed Snape's smile, the most genuine one he'd ever seen the Potions Master wearing, beginning to fade a little towards the man's more usual scowl.

"First, for Mr. Draco Black, for successfully defeating a fearsome opponent, forty points to Gryffindor."

“That puts us even with Hufflepuff!” whispered Hermione excitedly as the table erupted in cheers. Draco looked as if he didn’t know whether to smile or hide under the table.

“Second, for Mr. Ronald Weasley, for excellent and intelligent use of strategic planning, forty points to Gryffindor.”

The Gryffindors cheered even louder as Fred and George leaned over to deliver hearty slaps on the back to Ron, who looked like a victim of shellshock.

“Third, for Miss Hermione Granger-Lupin, for conquering a deficiency common to many of our kind, forty points to Gryffindor.”

Hermione stared at the Headmaster, who smiled politely at her. “What deficiency?” she hissed to Harry out the corner of her mouth over the sounds of celebration up and down the table.

“I think he means that thing you said about logic...” Harry didn’t have time to say anything else, since Dumbledore was about to speak again.

“Fourthly, to Mr. Harry Potter...” The Hall went absolutely silent. “For sheer nerve and surpassing courage... fifty points to Gryffindor.”

The sound of the cheers seemed to raise the invisible rafters of the Great Hall. “We’re tied with Slytherin!” shouted Draco over the noise. “We’ll both win the cup!”

Dumbledore waited patiently for the Gryffindors to finish. “Finally,” he said. “Facing our enemies is certainly an act of bravery. So, too, is facing our friends, trying to keep them from doing something we believe is wrong. Ten points are hereby awarded to Mr. Neville Longbottom.”

The roof might indeed fall in, Harry thought, on his feet and cheering at the top of his voice, and he wouldn’t much care if it did. Neville was chalk-white and mouthing the word “Me?” as the Gryffindors mobbed him, chanting his name. Even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were

cheering for him – or maybe they were just cheering for the end of Slytherin's winning streak. Harry didn't care.

Smiling serenely, Dumbledore clapped his hands, turning the green and silver decorations scarlet and gold and changing the Slytherin serpent to a Gryffindor lion, provoking a fresh wave of cheers. A wave of his wand levitated the House Cup into Professor McGonagall's waiting arms. Harry watched the other teachers shaking her hand once she'd put it down, congratulating her. He thought Snape's smile wouldn't have looked out of place on a torture victim.

Draco poked him and motioned to the Slytherin table. Several girls, including Pansy Parkinson, were in tears, Crabbe and Goyle looked confused, Dursley was staring up at Dumbledore with his mouth open, and Nott was glaring straight at them. Harry and Draco glanced at each other, then, in perfect unison, lifted their right hands and waggled their fingers in a snide little wave.

As the food appeared on the tables and everyone got down to the business of eating, Harry decided this night ranked as the second-best of his life.

Nothing, of course, could ever top the Pack's first night of freedom. "We'll owl you, Neville," promised Hermione as the friends waited in line at Platform Nine and Three Quarters the next day. "And the Pack will talk to your gran. I'm sure she'll let you come and stay for a while."

"I'd like that." Neville was still a bit dazed by being the hero of the hour, but all in all, Hermione thought, he was taking it rather well.

They passed through the barrier. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Theodore Nott and Dudley Dursley, off to one side talking to a small man in a cloak whom Hermione assumed was Theodore's father. As she watched, the man held out his hand, and Dursley took it and shook it.

Odd. Why would a pureblood, a Death Eater, shake the hand of a Muggleborn?

Maybe he's just being nice to his son's friend...

She shook her head and filed the sight away in her mind to think about later. Right now, it was time to go home.

"Father, this is Dudley Dursley," said Theodore. "I think he may be of some use to us."

The End

(for now)

(A/N: Guess what, everyone... it's break time! That's right, I'm going on a LwoD break! Having finished all the pre-Hogwarts stuff and year one, without ever really taking a break, I feel I deserve one. Not going to say how long it will be, because I don't know. So don't go getting all steamed up, and remember that threats do not generally encourage me to write!

I fully intend to continue writing this story – I have lots of stuff planned for year two, year three, and beyond, all the way to year seven – so don't get too worried. I WILL be back. Promise. So cheerio and all that, and please don't forget to review – and if you have questions, now's the time to ask them!)

Chapter 20: Surprise Visit

Not for the first time, a discussion was going on after breakfast at the Marauders' Den.

"He has to know," said Remus firmly. "This isn't going to go away – it's only going to get worse. He has to know."

"He's too young," retorted Danger, glaring at him. "He's not even twelve yet – how in the world do you expect him to handle something like this?"

"He handled the reality of it pretty well, you have to admit," said Aletha, keeping her tone even and reasonable with a bit of an effort – they'd been arguing this for a month, and they were no nearer resolving it than they had been the first night they'd talked it over. "And it's easier to face an enemy you understand than one you don't. Look at it from his perspective – right now, all he knows is that he's been a target for an evil wizard, and could become one again. Don't you think he deserves to know why?"

"The problem is," said Sirius, sounding weary and unhappy, as if he'd been over this too many times before, "the reason why he was targeted, and will keep on being, is both too frightening and too... too likely to make him prideful, I suppose... for a twelve-year-old to manage. I mean, think about it. How would you have reacted if you'd found out when you were twelve that you were 'the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord'?"

"This is still new to me," said Aletha, shaking her head at her husband. "You, arguing rationally – and against telling Harry everything."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Will you give it a rest already. Aren't I allowed to grow up?"

"Yes, you are," said Remus before Aletha could take advantage of the opening. "And so is Harry. He's going to have to, if he's ever going to fulfill that prophecy..." He added a few bitter and precise words on what he wished could happen to said prophecy.

"I'll second that," said Sirius roughly, staring out the kitchen window. "It's not fair. He's just a kid. He shouldn't have to deal with things like this."

Aletha reached around the corner of the table and laid a hand on Sirius' arm. "Sirius, love, if Harry doesn't deal with 'things like this', and soon, they'll deal with him instead. And we won't like how it happens. Voldemort's chances get worse as Harry gets older, not better, so he'll be trying to attack as soon as he can. Harry needs to be ready."

"Ready for what?" demanded Danger. "Ready to kill Voldemort?"

"Eventually, yes," said Remus flatly. "Because the only alternative is for him to be killed himself."

Silence held sway for a long moment as each of the four adults at the table acknowledged once again the painful truth in Remus' words.

They had known about this for a long time, in a nebulous sort of way. James and Lily Potter had told Sirius about the prophecy, explaining why they needed to go into hiding, why they needed the kind of protection the Fidelius Charm would bring. Sirius, in turn, had told the other adult Marauders the gist of the prophecy when they had been trapped in the dungeons at Malfoy Manor.

A week or so later, when they'd all had a chance to recover from the rapid-fire events which had included their acquisition of a fourth cub and the ousting of Cornelius Fudge from office, a potion Aletha had brewed had allowed Sirius to recall the full text of the prophecy. It had also reminded him of a number of small funny incidents that had taken place around that time, and the Pack had laughed perhaps harder than necessary over them, trying to put off looking at the prophecy and the doom it spelled out for the child they all loved – that he must kill or be killed...

But Voldemort doesn't know that.

Aletha sat up straighter as an idea came to her.

In the orchard on the hill, there was a great deal of joyous screaming going on.

“Come on, Draco, come on!”

“Go Harry, you can do it!”

A small golden ball with silver wings was zooming about the clearing dementedly, and two boys on broomsticks were following its every move, each trying to outstrip the other and catch it first –

Harry Potter dove beneath Draco Black and came up on his other side, using his wake to unbalance the blond boy. Draco had to cut back his speed to keep from falling, and by the time he'd stabilized, Harry had already caught up with the Golden Snitch and was waving it over his head, grinning.

“Show-off!” shouted Draco, but he was grinning as well.

On the grass below, Ron Weasley and Meghan Black cheered, while Hermione Granger-Lupin looked minorly disgruntled and Ginny Weasley crossed her arms and stamped her foot exaggeratedly. Luna Lovegood merely regarded everyone with her usual detached air, then marked something down on a sheet of parchment she was holding. “That’s three points for Red team,” she called out. “Red leads Gold, 5 to 3.”

“And that goes to show, it’s the flyer, not the broom,” said Ron jubilantly, slapping Harry on the back as he landed. “Draco’s flying a Two Thousand and One, and you still beat him on your old Two Thousand.”

“It’s only a year old,” protested Harry.

“Harry, a year in the broom business is like forty years in the real world,” said Draco, landing beside his brother and dismounting. “I bet you anything they’ll have another new model next year – probably go even faster than this does.”

Harry and Draco had shared the Nimbus Two Thousand for their first year at Hogwarts, thus circumventing the rule which stated that first years could not have their own broomsticks. Harry had grown attached to the broom, which had seen him through his first year as a Quidditch player and won him two games, so he'd opted to keep it, which meant Draco got a new one.

Harry had teased Draco on his birthday, four days previous, when he'd unwrapped the shiny Nimbus Two Thousand and One, saying his brother would need the faster broom, because otherwise he wouldn't have a chance of keeping up with Harry. The next morning, when Harry tried to pick up his own broom, it slipped out of his hands. Draco had jinxed it so that he couldn't keep a hold of it, and demanded an apology before he'd lift the spell. Harry opted to try and figure out a counterspell himself, and got it by good luck on his third go.

Have to get him back for that...

Harry pulled himself back to the present. He, Ron, and Meghan formed the Red team, facing off against Draco, Hermione, and Ginny on the Gold team, with enough games, races, and relays to keep them busy all day long. Luna had said she preferred keeping score to playing, so that made everything even.

She could play if Neville was here. Then we'd have even teams.

Harry grumbled under his breath. The cubs didn't want to pester the Pack-parents about Neville, but it did seem like they were never going to get around to asking his gran if he could come and stay. But they might just be waiting until after Harry's birthday, so that Neville wouldn't feel like he had to get Harry something...

That must be it, Harry decided. And his birthday was tomorrow. So it wouldn't be much longer.

He got back to the important business at hand – setting up for the next game, a combination running and flying relay.

"Gold team wins!" shouted Draco, running into the Den late that afternoon.

“By one little point,” countered Meghan, following him in. “And you wouldn’t even have had that if I hadn’t gone and fallen off my broom.” She growled in frustration, clenching her fists as if she wanted to hit someone.

“Pearl, everyone falls sometimes,” said Sirius soothingly.

“Not Harry,” snapped Meghan. “He never falls. Not even when he gets hit by Bludgers. I’m just no good and I want everyone to go away!”

Sirius signaled rapidly to Remus, who nodded and got up.

“What’s that mean?” asked Meghan shrilly, looking at the two men, who were moving closer to her. “What’re you – EEEEE! PUT ME DOWN!”

The rest of the Pack hurried in to see what was going on, Harry and Hermione from outdoors and Aletha and Danger from the kitchen. Remus had a hold of Meghan’s wrists and Sirius her ankles, and they were swinging her back and forth like a hammock, ignoring her shrieks, which were rapidly turning to giggles.

“You never do the fun stuff to us anymore,” said Harry mock-crossly when Meghan had been lowered to the ground, her bad mood dispersed.

“That’s because you’re too big for most of it,” said Sirius, arching his back. “And we’re getting too old for it.”

“What’s for dinner?” asked Hermione.

“You’ve forgotten the magic question,” said Aletha.

“How can we help?” said Draco rapidly.

Danger gave him a thumbs up and a smile. “Much better. Table needs washing and setting. And we’re having bread and cheese,

because it's much too hot for me to want to cook anything. So we can eat as soon as the table's ready."

The cubs descended upon the kitchen.

Harry took another slice of apple out of the bowl on the table and sneaked a look at his watch while he ate it. It was not quite seven o'clock – they'd have time for a good long game of Wizard's Monopoly before bed.

"May I please be excused," he said when there was a break in the conversation.

"Us too," said Hermione, indicating herself, Draco, and Meghan. "Please."

"You three may go," said Moony. "Harry, you need to stay."

Harry frowned. This was unusual. "Did I do something?"

"No. But we need to have a talk."

"About something we didn't tell you in June," said Padfoot.

Harry's heart started beating a little faster. When he'd woken up after the battle with Voldemort, the only question of his that the Pack hadn't answered was why. Why had Voldemort ever wanted to kill a one-year-old in the first place? And why him in particular?

"You three get lost," said Danger, waving her hands at the other cubs. "Shoo. This is Harry's time, he'll tell you about it or not as he likes, and you are not permitted to pester him about it. Out, and don't come back for at least an hour, understand?"

Hermione and Meghan fled the kitchen, giggling a little. Draco lingered, looking at Harry. Go on, Harry signed to him. I'm all right.

He wasn't sure if it was his reassurance or the snap of wolf-Danger's jaws perilously near Draco's leg that persuaded his brother to leave.

Moony and Padfoot had their wands out and were doing something to the walls of the den room when Letha led Harry into it. Danger loped in behind them and turned human again, sitting down on one of the cushions that littered the floor.

Moony finished whatever he was doing to the wall and started doing it to the ceiling. Letha took her wand out and did it to the door they'd come in by, and the noise of the dishes doing themselves from the kitchen stopped completely. Harry couldn't hear a thing.

Danger wiggled her eyebrows at him. "Secret time," she said in a stage whisper. "Big secret. Very mysterious."

Harry nodded. "I won't tell anyone," he answered in the same tones.

"You had better not," said Padfoot, finishing with the wall and flopping down on a cushion of his own. "Joking aside, Harry, this is important. We've been talking over whether or not we should tell you about this, and how much to tell you, for a month now, and we finally came to a compromise this morning."

"You asked why Voldemort would want to kill you," said Letha, sitting down beside Padfoot. "We will answer, but we have to ask you some questions first. How much do you know about prophecies?"

Harry chewed on his lip, thinking. "They're predictions of the future," he said finally. "They're usually hard to understand. Sometimes they're set up like riddles, so they can come out more than one way. I know Danger has them in dreams sometimes."

Moony nodded. "Very good. All of that is correct." His Pack-father looked grave, Harry noticed suddenly, and his excitement began to wane. Something was telling him he might not like this very much.

"Harry, a short time before you were born, a prophecy was made. That in itself isn't too unusual – prophecies happen more often than you'd think, and sometimes over very trivial things. But this one was not. It concerned Voldemort – and the person who could defeat him."

Harry's mind rushed through a million questions. He opened his mouth to ask one, but it wasn't the one he'd thought it was –

“Does Voldemort know?”

“He knows about the first part of the prophecy,” said Letha. “The part that we’re going to tell you. There is more to it, but the first part is the part you need to know right now. Will you trust us to tell you the rest when you need it?”

Harry nodded, throat suddenly dry.

Padfoot cleared his throat. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,” he recited. “Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.”

Harry's thoughts whirled. Seventh month is July. As the seventh month dies – at the end of the month –

“Your parents got away from Voldemort three times,” said Moony quietly, breaking into Harry's thoughts. “He tried to kill them three times, and failed. And they never gave in to his demands.”

The room, almost stiflingly warm only a moment before, seemed to have gone very cold. Harry looked around at his Pack-parents' faces, wishing one of them would crack, would start laughing and tell him it was all a joke – though it wasn't very funny...

“Does it mean me, then? The prophecy?”

“Voldemort thought it did,” said Padfoot. “Although there was another boy it could have been. You know him – you’ve been very good about not bothering us about him all this month.”

Harry's mouth did not fall open, though it was close. “Neville?”

“Don't sound so surprised,” said Letha dryly. “Frank and Alice Longbottom were Aurors, and some of the best around. Neville's got his mother's pluck as well as her face, and I wouldn't be surprised if he turns out to be a fine wizard once he's over his shakes.”

“Was he born at the end of July too?”

“Yes. In fact, now that I think of it, his birthday’s today.” Padfoot smiled reminiscently. “Alice Longbottom and your mother shared a room at St. Mungo’s, and you and Neville set each other off every time you cried. James and I ended up enchanting some earplugs to block out fussy baby noises.”

Moony smirked. “And then Lily smacked James upside the head for not doing his share of the diaper changing.”

Ordinarily, Harry would have been highly embarrassed by this, but his mind was busy with other things at the moment. “So does the prophecy mean I can beat Voldemort? Really beat him, for good, so he won’t come back?”

“Yes, and no,” said Danger, speaking for the first time. Her voice sounded a bit hoarse, and Harry wondered why. “Yes, you can – that is, you will be able to. Eventually. When you’re old enough, and have learned enough. But no, you cannot right now. Nor at any point in the near future. Just because you can defeat him does not mean that you necessarily will.”

Harry followed this thought to its logical conclusion and swallowed hard.

Just because I can beat him doesn’t mean I will – and if I don’t...

“Exactly,” said Moony, startling him into a jump. “So this doesn’t make you want to go charging off and find him?”

Harry shook his head vigorously.

“Good.” Moony looked pleased. “At the moment, there is no apparent danger to you that we know of. Albus – Professor Dumbledore to you – says that Voldemort is nowhere nearby...”

“That’s what he said during the school year,” retorted Harry.

“Well, now he’s sure of all the staff,” said Letha firmly. “None of them would allow Lord Voldemort into their minds for an instant.” She put a highly sarcastic spin on the title.

“Not even Professor Grumpy?”

“Him least of all,” said Moony. “Harry, trust me on this. Severus Snape is unfair, rude, and generally unpleasant to have around, but he is not Dark.”

“Not anymore,” muttered Padfoot under his breath.

Harry catalogued that little piece of information for future reference. “What about the new Defense professor?” he asked.

The Pack looked at one another and burst into laughter.

“No, not even the new Defense professor would cooperate with Voldemort,” Padfoot managed to get out.

“And no, we’re not telling you who it is,” added Letha, before going off into a fresh spasm of laughter.

Harry waited patiently for them to stop, and eventually, they did. Danger wiped her eyes and sighed. “This changes nothing except what you know, Harry. We’re still your Pack, you’re still our cub. We’ll still fight to protect you, until you can protect yourself. And there won’t – or there shouldn’t – be any need for that for some years to come.”

Harry nodded. “Can I tell the others?” he asked. “About this?”

“We’re not going to forbid it,” said Moony after a moment of silent conversation, conducted with facial expressions and hand-signals made where Harry couldn’t see them. “But we would rather you not. If you do, it is your responsibility to make whoever you tell understand how important it is that this remain secret.”

“Den-secret?” asked Harry without thinking, then wished he could take it back. He wasn’t sure the Pack-parents knew, or should know, that he and his friends had really formed a Pack...

Or have we?

“Yes, den-secret is the right idea,” said Danger approvingly. “Told only to the ones you trust completely. Very good.”

“Do you remember how it was at the beginning of this year?” asked Letha. “With everyone pointing and whispering?”

Harry made a face. “I hated it.”

“Well, they’ll do it again if this becomes public,” said Padfoot. “Harry Potter, Child of Prophecy.”

Harry groaned. “No. The Boy Who Lived is bloody bad enough.”

“Language, young man,” said Danger reprovably. “Watch that mouth.”

Harry contorted his face, sticking his lips out to the point where he could look down his nose and see them.

“I could always hex those off if they’re bothering you,” offered Padfoot, drawing his wand.

Harry promptly pulled his lips back in. “Can I go now?” he asked.

“Yes.” Moony drew his own wand and lifted the charm on the doorway. “But come here first.”

Harry came, and gladly accepted and returned the hug Moony held him in for a moment. The other Pack-parents took their turns as well, with the result that Harry left the room feeling rather better than he’d expected to.

He went outside, but instead of heading at top speed for the orchard, where he knew everyone else would be, he walked slowly, trying to take it all in.

I can beat Voldemort.

Maybe that means nobody else can.

I wonder what the others are going to say?

He tried to imagine their responses.

Ron will be kind of scared, but think it's cool too. Hermione will be all "oh, this is terrible". Draco will look at me all quiet and meaningful and just kind of nod. Ginny... I don't know what she'll do, she's still acting weird around me. Luna will say something nobody understands. And Meghan will hug me and promise she'll stay with me all the way to the end.

Something occurred to him. They said the prophecy could have meant Neville. Could it still mean him?

I wonder if he knows about it.

He ought to. If it means him, or could have meant him... he should know about it.

But if it's supposed to be so secret that the Pack sealed the room before telling me, then I shouldn't put it in a letter. Or firecall. I should tell him in person...

Something else came back to him, and it was the first thing out of his mouth as he arrived at the orchard.

"Today's Neville's birthday."

"Is that what they wanted to tell you?" asked Draco in surprise. "What was all the fuss about, then?"

"No, that wasn't what they wanted to tell me – it kind of came up while they were telling me. But we didn't send him a card or a letter or anything."

"We didn't know about it," objected Hermione.

“We should do something, though,” said Meghan. “Get him a present or something.”

“What did they want to tell you, Harry?” asked Luna.

Harry opened his mouth to tell them, then stopped. Another of his thoughts from earlier had just intruded on his mind.

Are we really a Pack? Do we qualify?

There’s eight of us, counting Neville. And we’ve all sworn the oath.

But we’ve never all sworn it at the same time. And never with blood. We don’t even all have pendants.

Maybe it’s time to fix that.

A plan came rushing into his mind.

“Who wants to have an adventure?” he asked.

The cubs went to bed without a fuss, and earlier than usual.

“Want to talk without us around, probably,” said Sirius after having finished tucking them in. “Maybe I ought to look around and see if I still have those old two-way mirrors. Then they could get a hold of Ron.”

“The last thing they need is more incentive to stay up late, Sirius Black,” said Aletha, flicking his ear. “They don’t need it now, and they certainly won’t need it during the school year – but if you must do it, I suppose now is the better time...”

Unknown to Aletha, the cubs needed no incentive whatsoever.

Harry was out the window on his broom within five minutes of their arrival in the bedroom. He hovered over the Den in the July twilight, waiting for the signal. Finally it came – three flashes of light from the direction of the Burrow.

He swooped back down to the window and helped Hermione mount behind him. Draco carefully maneuvered out the window with Meghan

seated in front of him. Their beds were stuffed so it would look, to a casual observer, as if they were all asleep in them. To a non-casual observer... well, what could the Pack-parents do? It wasn't as if they were leaving a note or anything...

Hermione was clutching a bag which contained some of the leftover bread, cheese, and apples from dinner, and a bottle of water and some cups, in case they needed a snack along the way. Meghan held the other vital items they'd need.

It was a short flight to the Burrow. They landed, dismounted, and hid their brooms in the Weasleys' broomshed – by the time anyone noticed there were two too many in there, they'd be long gone. Then they hurried to join their friends.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Harry asked Ron, noticing his friend's face looking unusually pale, even by moonlight.

"I'm sure."

"Let's go, then. We should probably get it onto the road before we start it – come on, everybody push."
Neville Longbottom was dreaming.

He was climbing a huge beanstalk, like the boy named Jack in the Muggle story, but it seemed to keep getting bigger as he climbed it. It was so big around now that it was hard like a tree in the center. He clambered from one leaf to another, trying not to look down.

Suddenly he heard a rapping noise. He looked around wildly for its source, and finally spotted it – a woodpecker was clinging to the beanstalk, pecking at it. Its feathers were a glossy dark brown.

"Hello," said Neville, not stopping to wonder why he was saying hello to a bird.

The bird turned and looked at him. "Open the window!" it said in a rather muffled voice.

Which sounded quite a lot like little Meghan Black.

Neville stared at the bird. Then the rapping sound came again, but it wasn't coming from the bird – it was coming from –

He woke up. Moonlight was pouring in through his window. And Meghan Black was outside it, rapping her knuckles against it.

Neville jumped out of bed and hurried across the room. "How did you get here?" he asked as soon as he'd opened the window. "And how—" He broke off, staring.

Meghan was halfway out the front window of a turquoise and white car, parked directly outside his bedroom window. This might not have been so amazing, except that his bedroom was two stories off the ground.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh – yes – of course." Neville held out his arms and helped Meghan climb out the car's window and in through his.

"You could have opened the door," said Hermione from inside the car, and Neville belatedly noticed everyone else inside the car.

And it was everyone else. Neville could hardly believe his eyes. Harry, Draco, Ron, Ron's sister, and the Lovegood girl – they'd all come...

He moved hastily aside as Hermione, suiting action to words, popped the back door open and climbed nimbly in through his window. Draco followed her and turned back to assist Luna Lovegood in, and Ron brought the car carefully around so that Harry and Ginny could get out the other side. "Let me in downstairs?" he asked Neville. "I have to go park."

"Sure." Neville hurried down the two flights of stairs, his mind racing – why were they all there? What in the world could be so important that they had to come and see him at midnight? How had they even found out where he lived?

He opened the front door almost in Ron's face.

"I put it down in the field back that way," said Ron, indicating the rear of the house. "There wasn't anything important growing there, was there?"

"No, it's just grass – what are you all doing here?"

"Harry has something he wants us to do, and some secret or other he wants to tell everyone all at once. Oh, and we came to wish you happy birthday too. Sorry it's late."

Neville snuck a look at the kitchen clock as they passed. It was late, if just barely – his birthday had been over for about two and a half hours. But it still counted. "Thanks."

They climbed the rest of the stairs in silence and regained the safety of Neville's bedroom. The other six were sitting in a sort of circle, with two empty places – those must be for us...

"Ron, you're over here," said Harry, indicating a place between Ginny and Hermione. "Neville, you're across from him."

Neville took his indicated seat, in between Meghan and Luna Lovegood, who looked at him consideringly for a moment.

Harry coughed slightly, getting everyone's attention. "We've all sworn the Pack-oath at least once," he said. "But I think we need to make it official. And that means a full swearing. In blood."

"Blood?" Neville tried, with only partial success, to keep his voice from squeaking.

"Just a little cut," said Hermione. "On your hand. We've done it. But there's one other thing you need. Something from someone who loves you. Something like a ring, or a piece of jewelry. And something you're willing to lose."

"You get it back," said Draco hastily, seeing Neville's expression. "But it's different." He pulled out his chain. "It turns into these. We made

them with rings our parents gave us – one my mum left me, Harry's mum and dad's wedding rings, Hermione's too."

"I have my grandfather's old ring," said Ron, showing a curiously shaped gold ring. "He taught me how to play chess. When he died, he left me his chessmen and this."

"I brought a ring Mum gave me," said Ginny very quietly, showing it. "She says it was the promise ring Dad gave her while they were in school, before they got engaged. She wanted me to keep it to give to a boy I liked." She blushed. "But I want to use it for this."

"My mum's wedding ring," said Luna simply, taking off the chain where the ring hung around her neck. "She died for me. I know she loved me."

Neville looked at his hands as if hoping they would provide inspiration –

And suddenly they did.

"I'll be right back," he said, and hurried out of the room.

He had to be careful. His gran was a light sleeper, and her jewel box was charmed to resist intruders. But he wasn't an intruder – she allowed him to look in there sometimes, as long as he didn't take anything out –

But he was going to take something out now.

"It was my dad's," Neville said when he returned, displaying the ring to everyone. The initial letter H glistened in the moonlight. "I don't know what it stands for, but he always used to wear it. Gran says it's mine now, so I can do what I want with it."

Harry nodded. "Then we're ready. Everyone put your things in the middle." He pulled off his chain and dropped it into the middle of the circle. Ginny set her ring on top of it. Neville put his beside hers, and Meghan added her chain next. Ron put his ring on top of Neville's

and Ginny's, and Hermione looped her chain around the others. Luna pressed her mother's ring once to her lips, then added it to the pile, and Draco piled his chain on top of it.

Harry held out his hand to Meghan, who gave him a small bag she was holding. He opened it and took out a white cloth, like a handkerchief or a napkin, and a knife. Neville gulped as Harry made a small cut on the palm of his left hand and let blood drip onto the cloth. "Do it on your off hand," he said, passing the knife and cloth to Ginny. "And not too much – just a little is enough."

Knife and cloth passed from Ginny to Ron, to Hermione, Draco, Luna, and it was Neville's turn. He swallowed hard again, and then felt a small, cool hand on his leg below where his pajama shorts ended. It seemed to give him courage, and the cut didn't hurt as much as he'd thought it would. He blotted his hand on the cloth and passed the items to Meghan, who scored her own hand lightly, added her blood to the mixture already there, and gave both things back to Harry.

Harry leaned forward to wrap the rings and necklaces in the cloth, then sat up straight again and took a deep breath. "We now will swear an oath. Hear me speak it first, and then look around you. If there is anyone here to whom you cannot swear this, depart now. For this oath is binding by magic, and the one who breaks it will never find rest, by day or by night, in life or in death. Hear me now –

"My hand in yours,

"My wand with yours,

"My life for yours,

"Now and always.

"Is there any here who does not wish to swear?"

No one spoke. No one moved.

"Then join hands, and speak the oath with me, three times, to make it truly binding upon us all."

Danger leaned against one of the outer walls of Hogwarts, feeling the sun-warmed stone against her cheek...

"You again," said a familiar, slightly sardonic voice in her ear.

She jumped slightly and spun around, hands in a defensive posture. Alexander Slytherin backed away. "Whoa, easy there. I'm not about to hurt you."

"No, just scare me out of my wits," Danger retorted. "So where exactly is that portrait of yours at Hogwarts?"

"Oh, that's not for me to tell you. It's your cubs' secret."

Danger rolled her eyes. "Wonderful. They're keeping secrets from us now."

"Turnabout is fair play – though I must say, that was a nice piece of work you did with Harry about the prophecy. And speaking of Harry... it's three o'clock in the morning. Do you know where your cubs are?"

"Is this a trick question?"

"Yes."

"Then no, I don't. Where are they? Or is that also not for you to tell me?"

"Oh, not at all. They're at Longbottom House."

"Longbottom House? What in the world are they doing there?"

"Something none of us anticipated," said Alex with a rueful smile. "Or at least not so soon."

"What?"

Alex gestured. A section of air turned opaque in front of them.

Eight small figures could be seen, sitting in a circle on the floor of a bedroom, hands joined, with a small red and white bundle in the middle of the circle – and as Danger listened, eight voices began to recite something –

“Oh my God. They’re swearing the oath, making themselves a Pack, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Is something going to go wrong? Are they going to be hurt?”

“Hurt – no, heavens no, not at all.” Alex looked surprised that Danger should even ask. “But the oath will be binding on them – they all understand it. If any of them should betray the others...” His face darkened for a moment. “But I don’t think they will. They seem like good sorts.”

“There has to be a reason you’re showing me this,” said Danger, looking back at the scene. “There’s always a reason, with you people.”

“Give that lady a fuzzy slipper,” said Alex, grinning. “She’s figured us out.”

Abruptly, they were indoors, in a comfortable and capacious chamber. Not the one Danger had seen on her last visit – that seemed to be for formal occasions. The Founders were sitting around, engaged in various activities – Danger saw Helga and Adam Hufflepuff fussing over a tray of seedlings, Brenna Ravenclaw treading a spinning wheel, Paul Gryffindor shooting small balls of fire from his fingers at targets set up along the opposite wall...

“I’ve done my part,” announced Alex loudly, sitting down on nothing – but a chair scurried up behind him as he sat, so that it was there when he was. “Somebody else gets to do the explaining now.”

“Lazy,” said Maura Gryffindor, looking up from her book. She graced Danger with a warm smile. “Will you walk with me, Madam Granger-Lupin?”

“Of course. And please call me Danger.”

“Then you must call me Maura.”

The two women left the room and walked quietly down the hallway.

“What Alex did not want to have to tell you,” said Maura after a few moments of silence, “is that your magic spinning out of control over the past several months was in some ways our fault.”

“Your fault?”

“Yes. There is a certain magic in words, Danger, as you must know. When we named your powers for you, you conceived of certain meanings and uses for them. Rowena and Helga may have influenced you, by calling your third magical power ‘wild’. For wild it certainly became. And for this we are sorry.”

“Couldn’t you have stopped it? Helped me get control or something?”

“We would have, had it become necessary – but it never was. Your Remus was able to help you on all occasions when you needed such help. But he may not always be able to do that for you.”

Danger nodded. “I know. I’ve been trying to think, all this month, what I can do if it ever starts happening again – because next time it might not stop with whatever’s directly threatening the cubs. It might start bashing down whatever’s in its way, or whatever it perceives might be a threat... and that’s bad. That’s very bad.”

“Agreed.”

They walked a short way again in silence.

“Another choice stands before you now,” said Maura as they came into the hallway leading to the marble staircase and the entrance hall. “Your wild magic, as it stands, is too powerful to be permanently tamed to your will. Your desires to protect your loved ones must be very strong indeed, to produce such power.”

Danger smiled, feeling her cheeks heat slightly. "I think that was a compliment, so thank you."

"It was, and you are welcome. To deal with this obviously untenable situation, we can offer you a choice. In the first place, we can help you convert some of this wild magic of yours into another kind of magic, a controlling magic, to keep the other leashed until it must be used. You would surely have more control this way, but it would be a difficult life. You would need to be constantly watching the wild magic and using the controlling techniques."

"I understand."

"The other choice is a bit more complex." The women walked into the entrance hall. Maura gestured, bringing up again the view of a bedroom with eight small people in a circle on the floor. "They will need power, to face all the challenges they must face. Courage, cunning, intelligence, loyalty, all these they have, in abundance. But it might benefit them to have extra magical power available to them."

Danger stared. "Are you suggesting I transfer some of my magic to the cubs?"

"Yes. That would reduce your magic to a level you can control. And do remind me to tell you precisely how best to use the wild magic..." Maura sighed. "I'm afraid that label is going to stick, like it or not. So. Can you make the choice?"

"Not yet. What kind of downsides for each? I mean, you said that if I choose to keep all the magic, I'll have to be on it quite a lot, keeping it under wraps. What's the downside of transferring?"

"There are several. It will be harder on you – you will need several days to recover fully. It will also affect the children, and the way they relate to one another, although they may not realize it or notice it for a long time. Since they are currently linked in their oath-swearing, any power that you transfer to them now will go to all of them equally, to be used equally, and therefore leave a magical trace behind, making them more permanently linked, magically. And, of course, it will make

them more powerful, and you less. You will be less able to protect them from the vagaries of the world.”

Danger twisted a hand in her hair, thinking. “Is there any way I could talk to Remus about this?” she asked finally. “Or Sirius, or Letha?”

“Certainly.” Maura gestured to the open floor space. Three fireballs – explosions in reverse, it seemed – appeared, and Remus, Aletha, and Sirius appeared out of them. “I await your leisure.” She vanished.

Danger explained, as quickly as possible, what was going on and her current choice. Aletha was livid that the cubs had left the Den without permission. Remus said nothing, but Danger could see quiet amusement on his face. Sirius admired their guts, and said so openly, earning himself a smack from Aletha.

“So you can keep your magic and have better control; or give it away, knock yourself flat on your back, and do something we don’t really understand to the cubs,” said Sirius finally.

“I think I know which one you’d advise, then,” said Danger with a sigh.

“I know which one sounds better at first blush. But my first impressions aren’t always right. Let me think about it for a minute.”

“They’re going to face a lot of danger in their lives,” said Aletha, looking at the picture, still showing the circle – Danger suspected it had been frozen. “It might do them well to have some extra power.”

“That’s what Maura said, but I’m worried about them abusing it...”

“The cubs are generally responsible,” said Remus. “Present conditions notwithstanding. Besides, how can they abuse it if they don’t know about it?”

“You have a point.”

“I think I’m going to be outvoted anyway,” said Sirius, “so I might as well change my mind now. They’re turning themselves into another

Pack, so go on, give them some Pack-magic. Give old Voldie-wart a surprise when he tries them on for size.”

“That rhymed,” said Aletha. “You’re a poet.”

“And I didn’t know it.” Sirius grinned.

Danger grinned back. “It’s unanimous. Motion carried. The cubs get my extra magic, I get a few days’ bed rest, and our four get double chores while I’m in bed for sneaking out that way.”

“Agreed.” Remus turned at a noise behind him and bowed politely. “Madam Gryffindor.”

“Maura, please, Remus – if I may?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve decided, Maura,” said Danger. “The magic goes to the cubs.” She took a moment to get the words in the right order. “I, Gertrude ‘Danger’ Granger-Lupin, do hereby present that portion of my wild magic which I cannot control to the eight children currently forming themselves into a Pack in Neville Longbottom’s bedroom. So I speak, so I intend.”

Maura smiled. “And so let it be done. Place your hand on the viewing plane.”

Danger did so, and repressed a start as something like red light, tinged with blue and filled with hints of other colors, flowed from her into the picture beyond – into Hermione, and from her into Ron on one side and Draco on the other – from them, quickly, outwards to the rest of the circle – then it began to make cross-connections, until every one of the eight was connected directly to every other –

And then it was gone. Danger sagged, and Remus quickly supported her. The room was starting to tilt and turn black...

“Not yet,” said a voice, and a cool hand pressed against Danger’s forehead, sending new strength through her. She turned her head to

see Rowena Ravenclaw, obviously exerting her healing magic. "There is one more formality to go through first."

Danger's attention was caught by movement in the viewing plane. So was everyone else's.

Aletha gasped and Sirius bit off a swearword as the cubs and their friends collapsed to the floor where they sat, as if they'd all been Stunned...

And suddenly they were there, in the Founders' Castle. On the floor of the Great Hall, still sitting in their circle, all eight of them, wide awake and staring around them.

"It is time," said Godric Gryffindor, stepping out of nothing. "Time to name the honorary Heirs."

(A/N: OK, so I took a short break. Very short. I'm sure you're all terribly disappointed in me. And I hope this chapter answered a few of your questions... and was satisfactory in other ways... yeah, so please review and all that good stuff... and tonight's topic is circles. And what's up with the bio pages not accepting links anymore? Grr.)

Chapter 21: Heirs

Harry had never been so surprised in his life.

His Pack – the new Pack –

We're going to have to do something about that. It's confusing.

He and his friends, then, had just repeated the oath for the third time when something had happened that he hadn't expected at all. A red light had appeared around Hermione, and before she could let go of Ron and Draco's hands, the light had spread to them as well, and from there all the way around the circle. Then it had cross-connected, shooting lines every which way, apparently joining each of them to every other one.

In the center of the circle, beneath the place where eight lines of light met in a star, the napkin holding their rings and necklaces had burst into flame, exactly as it had when the original Pack had made their pendants. That, Harry'd been expecting, or rather hoping for. It seemed they had succeeded.

When the fire had flickered out, the red light had vanished as well. They had just released hands and claimed their pendants, putting them on, when the second unexpected thing happened. The room seemed to waver and flicker, like an image on a television when the signal wasn't coming in clearly, except that this was real –

And then they were somewhere else. Somewhere Harry recognized.

Hogwarts. Specifically, the Great Hall, in between the House tables. They were still sitting on the floor in their circle, Harry and the others in their traveling clothes and Neville in his pajamas, and every face Harry could see looked as amazed as he was himself.

"It is time," said a voice behind Harry. He turned just in time to see a man step out of thin air, a man dressed in red robes, with tawny hair going grey and wire-rimmed spectacles, who reminded him somehow of Dumbledore, and of Moony. Maybe it was the aura of authority that

all three of them wore, seemingly unconscious but quite definite, the assumption that if they gave an order it would be obeyed.

“Time,” the man continued, “to name the honorary Heirs.” The capital letter on the word was audible.

Harry glanced at his friends. Seven pairs of eyes were all on him. He was obviously the one expected to do the talking.

Well, I am the alpha. It’s my job unless there’s someone better to do it.

He turned back around, standing up as he did. The man had been joined by a number of other people – a younger man and woman also dressed in red, a number of women in blue, a younger man and an older woman in yellow, and –

Oh, no way.

“Al?” he said in surprise.

Nine heads turned to face the dark-haired man at the back of the group, the only one wearing green. “Al?” repeated the younger man in red, incredulously. “You told them to call you Al?”

“And what’s so wrong with that?” said Al defensively. “I didn’t know how much they knew, all right? And I didn’t think they’d be here so soon. You have to admit this was unexpected.”

“Al, what are you doing here?” asked Harry, ignoring this. “I thought you were dead.”

“Well, technically, I am.” Al came forward through the others. “This place is a sort of a dream, Harry. It’s kind of like a different reality... only not... stop laughing at me!” He rounded on the three younger women in blue, one blonde, one red-haired, one dark, who were all snickering. “You try explaining it to him – he’s twelve!”

“Why don’t you let someone with a bit more experience have a go?” suggested the dark-haired one, and flicked her fingers towards one of the tables.

Something changed at the corner of Harry's eye, and he turned to see his Pack-parents sitting at the table, four in a row, regarding him with expressions ranging from pride (Padfoot) to "wait until I get you home, young man" (Letha).

"Just tell me one thing," said Danger, standing up. "How did you get to Longbottom House?"

Harry's ability to register surprise was overloading, with the result that he was slipping into a state of false calm. It was with a mild sort of pride that he heard himself answering nonchalantly, "Borrowed the Weasleys' car and flew there."

"And how did you know where Longbottom House was to be found?" asked Moony.

"Borrowed that magical map you keep in your desk."

"There's a word for borrowing without permission," said Letha sternly. "And for leaving the Den without telling us. But we'll discuss that later."

Padfoot caught Harry's eye and gave him a thumbs-up and a wink. Harry grinned back. They'd be punished for sneaking out, he was sure, but it wouldn't be too horrible. After all, they'd done it with style, and that counted for something.

The rest of Harry's Pack had come up behind him, so it was to all eight of them that Danger explained that this was a dream, or something similar to a dream, so they'd be waking up at some point later, and that this place was a sort of reflection of the Hogwarts they knew – except that this place was perhaps more real than the castle on earth, making that one the reflection and this the reality –

"But that's a philosophical debate that we don't need right now," said Moony. "All you really need to know is that this is the home of the Founders."

"The Founders?" blurted Ron. "Like, the actual Founders?"

Moony smiled. "Ask them yourself."

Ron turned to look with awe at the group of people in brightly colored robes, who were watching from a polite distance. "Are you really..."

"Godric Gryffindor," said the man who had appeared to them first, stepping forward. "My colleagues, Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff." A distinguished, white-haired woman in blue and a cheerful woman in yellow with brown hair going silver gave little bows. "Salazar and one of his sons, Matthias, chose another path than this. His other son, Alexander, remains among us."

"So that's why you're a Parselmouth," said Harry in satisfaction. "You're an heir of Slytherin."

"One of the originals." Al was sitting on another of the House tables, his feet on the bench below it. "Sadly, it's my brother's line that continues, not mine."

"Continues?" Hermione pounced on the word. "You mean there are heirs of Slytherin still alive? And heirs of Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff?"

"Oh, yes," said Hufflepuff. "It is rather surprising – I mean, over a thousand years, it would be easy for a line to die out – but all four of our bloodlines have continued into your day."

"Who are they?" asked Draco. "The heirs, I mean."

"Uh-uh, little fox," said Al, shaking his head. "We're not allowed to tell you that. It would deprive you of all the fun."

Draco scowled at the man. "Fun?"

"Of finding them for yourselves." Al looked over the group, smiling enigmatically. "You can consider that your unofficial mission, if you like. Find the Heirs."

“The blood Heirs, that is,” Gryffindor corrected him. “All of you are about to become honorary Heirs.”

Harry felt a little shiver of excitement pass through him. “What does that mean? Do we get powers?”

“Not powers as such,” said Ravenclaw. “The family talents cannot be granted out of the bloodline except under very special circumstances.”

Harry nodded. “Like Moony and Danger.”

“Precisely.” Gryffindor looked a bit smug. “What we can give you, and will, are greater stores of the landmark ability of each House. Since you are all linked through your Pack-magic, each of you will be able to draw on each ability to a limited degree. We will also extend those powers which were granted to the first set of Pack-pendants to the second set – and you’re going to have to do something about finding a distinctive name for yourselves, having two Packs around is simply not going to work.”

“Could one of us maybe be the Pride instead?” asked Ginny almost diffidently.

“A pride – a family of lions...” Gryffindor nodded, obviously pleased. “I hadn’t thought of that, and I should have. Shame on me. Well done, Ginevra.”

Ginny blushed.

“We’ll be the Pride,” Harry decided. “The cubs. Then the Pack can stay as it was.”

“Very well.” Gryffindor gave another nod. “That being settled, shall we proceed?”

“The Pack stands ready,” said Moony, rising from his seat. “Harry?”

Harry looked around his friends, seeking for fear in their faces, and found none, only apprehension and excitement. "The Pride stands ready," he said, turning back to face Gryffindor.

"Then let the naming of the Heirs begin." Gryffindor flicked a look at Al, who nonchalantly climbed off the table just in time, as it and the other tables in the room vanished. Without any sense of motion at all, Harry found himself standing facing the dais at one end of the hall, with the rest of the Pack and the Pride standing beside him in a line. The ten Founders stood on the dais, facing them.

Al stepped forward. "I, Alexander Slytherin, do this day call forth those whom I wish to make my Heirs," he said formally. "Sirius Valentine Black, come forward."

Padfoot walked to the foot of the dais in front of Al, his movements more formal and controlled than Harry was used to seeing from him.

"Draco Regulus Black, son of Narcissa, come forward."

Harry heard his brother swallow nervously before he joined Padfoot.

Alex looked down at them. "Hear now the responsibilities of a true Heir of the House of Slytherin. To push onwards when others falter and fail. To prefer an artful solution to one of brute force, and to be the one who offers such a solution. To use all ethical means to your end, and to take the burden of any unethical means upon yourself, rather than tricking another into doing so. Will you accept these responsibilities?"

"I will," answered both wizards together.

Al stretched out his hands and placed one on Draco's right shoulder and one on Padfoot's left. "I charge you, no matter the behavior of others, never to let your actions dishonor that House to which you now belong. Receive that power which is rightfully yours."

Green light wreathed all three figures for a moment, then vanished. Al returned to his place in the Founders' line, and Padfoot and Draco to their places, Padfoot looking thoughtful and Draco lost for words.

“What’s it like?” asked Harry under his breath.

“Can’t explain. Wait till your turn.”

The man and woman in yellow had stepped forward now. The man spoke first. “I, Adam Hufflepuff, do this day call forth Neville Francis Longbottom, son of Francis, son of Alice.”

Neville looked about as astounded as he had the day Dumbledore had awarded him the points that gave Gryffindor the House Cup. Meghan had to nudge him to get him to move forward.

“I, Helga Hufflepuff, do this day call forth Gertrude Kelly Granger-Lupin, known as Danger, daughter of David, daughter of Rose.”

Danger looked surprised, but came forward anyway.

“Hear now the responsibilities of a true Heir of the House of Hufflepuff,” said Helga. “To do that work which is unending and often tiresome but necessary, with little to no thanks in return. To remain loyal to a just cause even when it seems an impossible dream. To follow one’s chosen leader faithfully but not blindly. Will you accept these responsibilities?”

“I will,” said Neville, his voice shaking only a little, with Danger’s firm answer coming a moment later. Adam placed his hands on Neville’s shoulders and Helga on Danger’s, Helga reminded them once more of their obligation to their adopted House, and yellow light blazed around them, then faded. They returned to their places, Danger smiling as if she had a special secret and Neville looking somewhat bewildered.

The four women in blue came forward. The red-haired woman spoke first. “I, Margaret Ravenclaw, do this day call forth Meghan Lily Black, daughter of Sirius, daughter of Aletha.”

The dark-haired woman was next. “I, Brenna Ravenclaw, do this day call forth Hermione Jane Granger-Lupin, daughter of David, daughter of Rose.”

The blonde woman stepped up. "I, Sophia Ravenclaw, do this day call forth Luna Marie Lovegood, daughter of Gerald, daughter of Anita."

Luna looked Sophia over as she came to the dais. "You've talked to me before," she said. "You told me about the Hogwarts Den, last Christmas."

Sophia nodded, smiling down at Luna. "I did indeed. And I shall speak to you again, little seer, so heed my voice well when you hear it."

"Luna's a seer?" whispered Harry to Draco.

"She saw us as humans when we were transformed," Draco whispered back. "And she did make that prophecy about the Den – I'd almost forgotten about it – that must be how you knew what to say to open the wall in the common room..."

Ravenclaw was giving them a look worthy of McGonagall. Draco promptly shut up.

"I, Rowena Ravenclaw, do this day call forth Aletha Carina Freeman-Black, daughter of William, daughter of Teresa."

Letha came forward, head held proudly.

"Hear now the responsibilities of a true Heir of the House of Ravenclaw," said Rowena. "To be ever diligent in learning, even when the knowledge is difficult or dangerous to acquire, or when it does not agree with a belief of one's own. To share knowledge with others as it is needed, but not to press it where it is not wanted, unless the need is great. To work for the healing of all breaches and a common fellowship of those who love the truth. Will you accept these responsibilities?"

They would.

Rowena reminded the witches of their responsibility to their new House, and blue light shone brightly around each pair. Meghan looked as if she'd seen an angel when Margaret released her. Hermione appeared shocked but also ecstatic. Luna seemed much the same as ever, running a finger absently along her crescent-moon scar as she returned to her place in line. Letha's face held something of the 'angelic vision' quality of Meghan's, but there was something else, something that hadn't been there before, a sort of peacefulness...

Draco elbowed him. He looked up. The two men and one woman in red had just taken their steps forward.

I suppose this is me, then.

The younger man spoke first. "I, Paul Gryffindor, do this day call forth Ronald Bilius Weasley, son of Arthur, son of Molly."

Ron looked surprised to hear his name, as if he'd thought he wouldn't be called. He went forward a little hesitantly, but seemed to gain nerve as he got closer.

The woman spoke. "I, Maura Gryffindor, do this day call forth Remus John Lupin, son of John, son of Katherine."

Moony walked to the dais with no sign of surprise or hesitation.

"I, Godric Gryffindor, do this day call forth Harry James Potter, son of James, son of Lily."

Harry started forward.

"And Ginevra Molly Weasley, daughter of Arthur, daughter of Molly."

Harry almost stopped in surprise. He wants us both?

Moony made a little motion with his hand, not a Marauder sign, just a simple "keep moving", and Harry obeyed as Ginny came out of the line and joined him. They walked the last few steps together to stand in front of the Founder of their House.

Godric looked down at them, his keen yellow-gold eyes meeting each of theirs in turn. "Hear now the responsibilities of a true Heir of the House of Gryffindor. To meet all challenges bravely, putting fear aside. To always defend those who cannot defend themselves. To lead faithfully and well, recalling that all great leaders are servants of those they lead. Will you accept these responsibilities?"

"I will," said Harry in the strongest voice he could muster. Ron nodded, then quickly said it aloud at Paul's gesture. Moony's response was quiet but positive.

Everyone looked at Ginny. She took a deep breath. "Yes. I will."

Godric stepped closer to them and put one hand on Harry's left shoulder and one on Ginny's right. "I charge you, no matter the behavior of others, never to let your actions dishonor that House to which you now belong. Receive that power which is rightfully yours."

Harry realized in that moment why Draco hadn't been able to tell him what it felt like. There were too many sensations to name just one.

He was a prism hanging in a window, and the sun had just come out... he was a crowded auditorium in which a concert was beginning... he was a log of wood in a fire, radiating heat and light and changing from one thing into another... he was a cookie baking in an oven, a spice cookie, he could smell the cinnamon and cloves...

Harry realized he had his eyes closed and opened them just in time to see a red light fading around him. He also realized something else.

Ginny dropped his hand as if it were a dragon egg when she noticed she was holding it. "Sorry," she stammered, turning bright red. "I didn't mean to."

"No, I think I did it," said Harry, wanting to reassure her. "It's all right, either way."

Ginny nodded, her eyes on the floor. They hastily returned to their places in the line.

“I charge you all,” said Godric when the line was complete again, “to use these powers always for good, never for evil, but to recall that life is a difficult and a complicated thing. And I remind you not to be too quick to deal out death and judgment, for even the very wise cannot see all ends. Let our ceremony be ended, in the name of all that is good.”

“Let it be so,” said the other nine Founders in chorus.

Paul Gryffindor let out an exaggerated sigh. “Finally. Now we can get to the really important stuff.”

“Like what?” asked Padfoot.

“Two words. Par tee.”

Padfoot grinned. “Think I could handle that.”

A long table appeared against one of the walls, filled with interesting-looking dishes and a large punch bowl. Comfortable chairs and low tables materialized nearby. A section of the room got the smoky look that Harry knew meant a Privacy Spell had been used on it, and fiery letters formed a sign on it:

Dance Floor

Enter at your own risk

“Well, let’s get started, then,” said Margaret Ravenclaw, descending the steps of the dais and heading for the snack table.

It was an excellent party, in Harry’s opinion. The food was delicious – he especially liked a sort of sweetened cheese dip sprinkled with chocolate and cinnamon, and the crunchy fried flatbread wedges that went with it – and the adults were including him and his friends in their conversations, and not talking down to them. The Pack-parents did this as a matter of course, but very few other adults Harry had met did so.

Al pulled him aside after his first trip to the snack table. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was before this," he said apologetically. "I thought there'd be time. Even Sophie's best estimates didn't have you eight doing this before at least your third year, and here it is not even quite your second yet. What brought this on?"

Harry glanced around. "The Pack told me about a prophecy," he said quietly.

"Ah, yes, that. 'Born as the seventh month dies' and all that, right?"

"Right." Harry frowned. "Don't you know?"

"Know what? About the prophecy?"

Harry nodded.

"Yes, I do, but I didn't know that they'd told you about it. They sealed the room where they were doing it – we knew they were telling you something, and we guessed it might be that, but we had no way to be sure."

"I thought you were supposed to be all-powerful," said Harry teasingly.

"No, not by a long shot." Al made a face. "Dead boring, that. Wouldn't ever be any challenges. So you decided to form a Pack-bond because of the prophecy?"

"More or less."

"Good. Excellent. Quite possibly the best thing you could have done." Al looked highly satisfied. "My distant relative won't have a clue what hit him."

"Your what?"

"The present-day blood Heir of Slytherin. We're not allowed to tell you who he is, or even that he is a he – could be a female Heir, has been in the past. Or there could be more than one. So keep your eyes open."

Over Al's shoulder, Harry could see Meghan tugging Neville towards the dance floor. "I will." His eyes came back to Al, and he noticed with surprise that the man looked anxious. "Something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong... but I did want to ask you something."

"Go ahead." Harry took another pretzel off his plate and bit off one of the top loops.

"Well, I need to tell you something first." Al's eyes flicked around the room, making sure they wouldn't be overheard. "I wanted you as an Heir. But I was only allowed two, and your godfather and your brother were better picks on qualifications alone. I hope you don't mind."

"Why should I mind? They'll make great Heirs of Slytherin."

"Yes, but so would you have. So I want to offer you something. It's not done very often – all right, I'll be honest, it's never been done. But you deserve it. I want to make you a secondary Heir. A kind of cousin to the line, if you like." Al's voice changed. "You definitely have one qualification they don't."

Harry grinned. "Which I have no idea how I got, unless I picked it up from Voldemort."

"What, is he teaching classes now? Beginning Parseltongue and Elementary Dark Magic?"

Harry laughed aloud. "I'd be honored," he said in English.

"All right. You heard the spiel back there, so I don't have to repeat it – don't do anything to bring shame on the House, or you'll answer to me, understand?" Al sounded so like Padfoot in his lecturing mode that Harry had to laugh again. "Best of luck with it." He leaned forward and put his hand against Harry's chest where his newly reformed Pack-pendants hung, and Harry felt a little spark jump from Al to him. For one instant, he felt as if he were being filled with deliberate, cool, green power like water filling a bowl...

“And by the way, the name is Alex. I hate Al.”

“So, why did you tell us to call you that, then?”

“Because I didn’t know how much Danger had told you about us, and I didn’t want to give everything away right away. Oh, and you remember when you were asking me about the people who used your Den before you?”

“Yeah.”

Alex spread his hands expansively. “All around you.”

“You used the Den?”

“We made the Den. Well, not me, or any of the other younger ones – my dad, Rick, Gaga, and Weena. It was their special meeting room.”

Harry stared at the man. “Weena?”

“If you ever call her that to her face, I will deny telling you about it,” said Alex hastily. “She hates it more than Helga hates Gaga.”

Harry took one look at the gracious figure of Rowena Ravenclaw, in earnest discussion with Moony and Letha about something, and started laughing like he’d never stop.

Everything after that seemed to blur into a pleasant mélange of eating, talking, dancing, laughing, music, and light. Harry caught bits and pieces of happenings: Danger was scolding Godric for stealing a line from J.R.R. Tolkien, to which Godric replied, “My dear, who do you think gave Tolkien the line in the first place?” On the dance floor, Meghan was trying to teach Neville how to waltz without stepping on her feet so much, and Padfoot was giving Hermione a refresher on one of the set dances.

Luna and the Ravenclaw daughters were off in a corner, having an earnest and almost unintelligible conversation about animals Harry had never even heard of. Draco and Ron were taking turns tossing nuts into the air for the other one to catch in his mouth. Harry joined

them, and so did Alex and Paul Gryffindor and Adam Hufflepuff, and they kept the game going for quite a long time...

Harry blinked, wondering what he was doing on the floor, why the room seemed so small, and why he couldn't feel one of his legs.

He sat up and got an answer to at least two of his questions. The room seemed small because it was – they were back in Neville's bedroom. And one of his legs must have gone to sleep as a result of Ginny Weasley's head resting on it.

And we were on the floor last night when we went to sleep, so we're still there.

The rest of the Pride lay in various attitudes of rest, still in their rough circle, and all showing signs of beginning to wake up.

The Pride. I like that. Harry smiled down at Ginny's sleeping form. It was a good idea.

But I wish she'd get over whatever this is that she's got about me. It's starting to get annoying.

Ron yawned enormously and opened his eyes. "Morning," he said sleepily.

"Morning." Harry looked out the window at the clear blue sky.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks." Something was bothering him about that sky, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Nice day," Ron observed, sitting up. "No clouds anywhere..."

"Which means we can't drive back," said Harry, suddenly realizing. "Or at least not in the air."

Ron looked worried. "I can't drive on the road," he said. "I've never driven in traffic. And I don't look old enough, I'd get pulled over for sure."

Harry groaned. "We should definitely have thought about this before we came."

"Wait," said Ron, frowning in concentration. "Your parents were there last night – in the dream..." He looked over at Harry. "You did have a funny dream about Hogwarts and the Founders, didn't you?"

Harry nodded. "And naming us honorary Heirs – you and Ginny and I are all Heirs of Gryffindor now."

"Your parents were there with us. And Mrs. Danger asked you how you got here, and Mr. Moony how you knew where it was. So they know we're here."

Harry felt stupid. "Of course. One of them will come by Floo, or Apparate here, and bring the car back – they all know how to drive – and we can go home by Floo."

"And get started on being punished." Ron grimaced. "I probably won't see you for the rest of the summer."

Harry shrugged. "It's only a month. Then we'll be back to school. New Defense teacher – and the Pack-parents still won't tell us who – and harder classes, and more Snape."

"We need to prank him extra hard this year," said Draco, opening his eyes. "To make up for not doing it last year."

"How long have you been awake?" asked Ron.

"Long enough to hear Harry talking about school. Did I miss anything?"

"Just that we should probably stay here until one of the Pack-parents comes for us. They know we're here, and one of them is going to have to take the Weasleys' car home, since we're not old enough to drive on the road, and it's too clear a day for flying."

Draco nodded. "Has anyone looked at your pendants?" he asked. "To see how they're different?"

"No, not yet." Harry pulled his out of his shirt and stopped in surprise. "One big difference." He held them up for the other boys to see – other cubs, he corrected himself, as Hermione sat up, rubbing her eyes. Three of his pendants now sparkled with a small, multifaceted, translucent red gem, set in a hole directly beneath the one for the chain, so that the gem showed on both sides of the medallion. The fourth had a gem as well, but this one was green.

"Nice," said Draco, pulling out his own. "All mine are green – because of the Heir thing, d'you think?"

"Definitely," said Harry. Ron's gems were all red, and Hermione's all blue, bearing out the theory that their color was based on the House they'd been adopted into.

And I have one green one because of the secondary Heir bit...

Ron studied the carvings on his medallions. "This one's got some Muggle thing on it," he said. "And a muffin tin on the other side."

"Let me see?" Hermione took the pendant from Ron. "That's a battery, like your dad collects. It's for your mum and dad. And isn't that a chess piece down in the corner there? For your granddad?"

"Yeah, it is." Ron looked pleased. "Then there's one with animals – four of them – a couple of cats, a bird, and a deer..." He turned it over. "And three on this side. Two dog-looking things and a monkey."

"That's us," said Harry. "The Pride. Wolf, fox, demiguise, cat, lynx, owl, and doe – and hawk, for you, but you won't have yourself."

"Then this next one – animals again. Lizard with wings, a dragon maybe, and another cat, and a couple of birds on the other side."

"That sounds familiar," said Draco. He scanned his own pendants. "Does it look like this?" He lengthened his chain and tossed the medallions to Ron, who compared them.

“Yes. They’re just alike, no different at all.”

Hermione, looking around the room, made a little squealing noise. “Look – isn’t it adorable?”

Harry looked. Meghan was nestled up beside Neville, who had draped one arm over her. She was holding his hand in her sleep.

“That goes a little beyond adorable, into bizarre,” said Draco, looking slightly alarmed. “That’s my sister.”

“Yes, and Neville’s our Packmate,” said Harry. “Or Pridemate, I guess. Sorry, Ron, we got distracted – what were you saying?”

“This third one, with the dragon and the cat and the birds, it’s exactly alike with Draco’s and mine. Do you have it?”

“I think so...” Harry looked over his pendants. “Yes.”

“What does it mean?”

Harry frowned, trying to think if the Pack-parents had ever mentioned anything about that particular pendant... “I don’t know, actually. They’ve never said. So we have a mystery. What about your fourth one?”

“It’s blank,” said Ron, displaying it. “Just the jewel, no carvings on it at all. What about yours?”

Harry pulled out his fourth one and blinked in surprise. “One side of this used to be blank. Now it’s got... it’s got you, Ron. Look.” He handed his friend the pendant. “Right there, flying.”

Ron ran his finger over the carving of the hawk, closing his eyes, leaning forward as if he could feel the wind against his face right now.

“And Luna, the owl,” said Hermione, examining her own pendant. “And the demiguise for Neville, and the lynx for Ginny...”

As if the sound of her name had penetrated her sleep, Ginny roused. She blinked sleepily at the room for a moment, then sat up with a strangled gasp as she realized where she was lying.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Harry. Ginny nodded, flushing red, and quickly looked somewhere else.

“Will Ginny’s have the same as mine?” asked Ron.

“The same first one,” said Harry, electing to look somewhere other than at Ginny, who was obviously distressed by the way she’d spent the night. “Because you’re brother and sister. Danger and Hermione have the same first one. But her other one will be different – she’ll have you, the hawk, but not her, so no lynx.”

“How come we don’t have ourselves?”

“Didn’t we ever explain what these are for?” asked Harry in surprise.

“No. Or not a lot. I know they tell you if someone’s in trouble, but not how, not really.”

“They change temperature,” said Hermione. “They get hot if someone’s upset, and cold if someone’s in danger of dying – like ‘mortal peril’ on your clock. And that person’s carving glows, so you can tell who it is.”

“Harry, which of yours has the green one?” asked Draco.

“The one we don’t know much about,” said Harry, displaying it. “The one that’s the same for all of us.”

“Wonder if that means anything.” Draco’s attention was suddenly pulled away as Luna, lying next to him, yawned and stretched. “Good morning,” he said to her. “How did you sleep?”

“Very well, thank you. I had an interesting dream.” Luna sat up slowly, looking around Neville’s bedroom. “All about Hogwarts and the Founders. You were all there. Did you have it too?”

“Yes, we all did. Can we see your pendants?”

Luna’s gems were blue. Her last pendant, like Ron’s, was blank, and her first one had carvings that baffled Harry. One side looked like a bowl, and the other some odd creature that he’d never seen before.

Luna had no such trouble. “The bowl is for Mum,” she said. “For the scrying spell. And that’s a Crumple-Horned Snorkack for Daddy. He’d like to catch one and study it someday.”

Hermione bristled up and was about to say something.

“Have a look at mine, Luna,” said Draco quickly. “That’s you, right there, the owl.”

“I look very wise,” said Luna in a pleased voice, studying the carving. “I like it.”

“Shouldn’t they be waking up?” asked Ginny quietly, looking at Neville and Meghan.

Hermione frowned. “Yes, they should. Meghan’s a light sleeper, she shouldn’t have slept through all this noise. I wonder what’s going on?” Heaven...

I’m in heaven...

Neville knew he was dreaming. He had to be dreaming. His feet never moved this surely in real life. And he had never owned anything nearly as nice as the handsome black dress robes he was wearing.

He wasn’t overly eager to wake up.

Especially because he was holding Meghan against him in the pose the song suggested for finding heaven. She wore a blue dress with a corsage of red and yellow roses on her wrist, and she looked older than she was in real life...

And I feel older. Taller.

I wish I had a mirror.

One appeared in front of him, hovering at his eye level and staying in front of him as he rotated in the moves of the dance.

Dreams are great.

He was older. At least fourteen. Which would make Meghan eleven. Three years wasn't so much difference, really...

"Can I stay here?" he asked wistfully.

"We have to leave soon," Meghan answered without taking her face away from his. "We'll need to wake up. But we can always come back."

"Tomorrow night, then?"

Now she did pull away, to grin at him. "It's a date."

The song came to a close as he twirled her expertly, out and back in, and she tilted her face up and planted a kiss on his cheek, making him blush a little.

Remus rang the doorbell of Longbottom House and waited. A few moments passed before the door opened. "Mr. Lupin," Augusta Longbottom greeted him.

"Mrs. Longbottom. I believe you and Neville have some unexpected visitors. I'm here to bring them home."

Mrs. Longbottom frowned. "Not that I know of."

"They may not have come downstairs yet, then," said Remus. "May I come in?"

"Not have come downstairs?" repeated Mrs. Longbottom, stepping aside. "What, may I ask, is going on?"

"Last night, our four, Ron and Ginny Weasley, and Luna Lovegood 'borrowed' Arthur Weasley's car and went for a joyride. I have reason

to believe they ended up here. They may well be up in Neville's bedroom right now."

"Let us see, then." Mrs. Longbottom swept up the stairs, Remus behind her.

A burst of children's laughter stopped them at the second landing. "It's a wand shooting flowers!" giggled a voice which Remus had no trouble identifying as Meghan. "And the one on the other side has sparks coming from it!"

Mrs. Longbottom nodded. "It would seem you're correct."

Neville's door was shut. Mrs. Longbottom knocked briskly on it.

"Coming!" called Neville's voice, sounding a bit startled. Two or three thumps and a large amount of scurrying later, Neville opened the door, doing his best to look innocent. "Good morning, Gran, Mr. Lupin."

"Good morning, Neville."

"Hello, Neville," said Remus. "Are you all alone in there, or might there be a few spare children I could have?"

Neville smiled at the joke. "You can come out," he called. "It's all right."

Cubs appeared from everywhere Remus would have thought to hide, and one or two places he might not have. "Good morning," he said with a smile. "I assume you haven't had breakfast yet?"

Harry shook his head cautiously.

"Good. Because you'll be cooking for everyone for a while, Harry, since Danger's off her feet for a few days. And when you're not doing that, you'll be cleaning – and that goes for all of you. You're about to find out just how much Danger does around the Den when you're not looking."

"Is that our punishment?" asked Hermione. "Cooking and cleaning?"

"Unless we come up with something better, yes. Though I can't speak for your mother," he said to Ron and Ginny. "I was instructed to send you straight home, and Molly did not sound pleased with you."

Ron nodded, looking a little unhappy, but as if it were no more than he'd expected.

"And your father would like you to leave a note the next time you go out at night, Luna, but he understands that you were worried about getting everyone else caught, so he's not going to punish you this time."

Luna accepted this with equanimity, nodding and tucking the necklace she was wearing back into her shirt. Except that it wasn't just a necklace, Remus realized with a slight shock. Luna was wearing Pack-pendants. Or would hers be Pride-pendants?

This may take some getting used to.

"May the children use your Floo?" he asked Mrs. Longbottom. "I'll have to drive Arthur's car back, but there's no reason they shouldn't get home quickly."

"Of course. Say goodbye to your friends, Neville."

"Can Neville come and stay with us?" blurted Harry, obviously seizing the moment.

Remus raised an eyebrow. "The day after sneaking out in the middle of the night and stealing a car is not the best time to be asking for favors, Harry..."

"Sorry," mumbled Harry, looking at the floor.

Remus smiled to himself. "But if his gran agrees, I think that could be arranged. Maybe for a week or two near the end of the summer." He looked at Mrs. Longbottom.

“I see no reason why not,” she said. “As long as he won’t be any trouble to you.”

“No trouble at all. We’ll owl you to work out details.”

The children were grinning at each other when they thought he wasn’t looking.

(A/N: Yes, in case you can’t tell, I’m right back on track. I think one more chapter of summer fun, and then we’ll be back to school, possibly with more flying car fun, and you’ll finally find out who the new Defense teacher is...

Do you like the Heirships? Is that even a word? Well, now it is. Make that your review topic for today – words that aren’t... like “amn’t”... have you ever thought about that, why we have “aren’t” and “don’t” and “can’t” but not “amn’t”? All we have is “ain’t”, and “ain’t” ain’t a word cause it ain’t in the dictionary... except it is... anyway. Review! Please!)

Chapter 22: Disclosures and Departures

To arise or not to arise, that is the question...

Most people would have been a little startled to be awakened by a fractured Shakespearean quotation in their heads.

Good morning to you too.

Remus Lupin wasn't most people.

And it's nice to hear that it's a question, he continued, sliding his hands into the mass of hair that was all he could currently see of his wife. It hasn't even been that these past few days – it's just been "You go on, I'll stay here".

When they said the power transfer would knock me down, they weren't kidding. One day completely out of it – was I unconscious, or asleep?

More asleep, by the feel of your mind, but it was a very deep sleep. Remus gently parted Danger's hair and started caressing her shoulders. I think you need to get this stuff cut.

Probably. And then three days in bed, not asleep, but not wanting to go anywhere either, and getting my entertainment from your descriptions of the cubs trying to keep up with the housework...

Do you think they've been punished enough?

Yes, I think so. You're really holding them to a high standard, aren't you?

Free work – child labor laws don't apply to one's own children. Or wards, or whatever.

None of them thought to challenge you on the "you're not my guardian, I don't have to do what you say" standpoint?

I don't think any of them really think about that anymore. Not that they ever did, except when it came up in court. I don't think about it myself – they're just mine, legal or not.

Here's hoping we never have to try to defend it in court.

Amen.

Danger rolled over and planted a kiss on Remus' cheek. Don't let me forget, I have something to tell everyone at breakfast. Now, shall I go relieve Harry of his toast-burning duties?

Now, now, he hasn't burned anything since the first day. And Sirius put the fire out before it got too far.

Where were you?

Rescuing Hermione and Meghan from the evil avalanching closet. How did we get so much stuff in there anyway?

I think it was magic.

Should have seen that coming.

What did Molly do to Ron and Ginny?

A few extra chores and a lecture. Nothing too terrible.

A Molly Weasley lecture and you call that "nothing too terrible"?

Of course. I live with you.

The rest of the Pack was greatly entertained that morning by the spectacle of Remus running for his life from an infuriated Danger, who snatched the frying pan from which Harry had just removed a large amount of bacon and started swinging at Remus with it. He dodged her first swing, ducked the second, and came up in time to catch her wrist as she hauled off for a third. With that grip on her, he could pull her in and kiss her soundly.

“You see, that’s what girls like,” said Aletha in satisfaction. “A little adventure, a little romance.”

“Having a hot frying pan swung at my head is not my idea of romance.” Sirius edged his chair a little farther away from Aletha as Harry, hands muffled in potholders, reclaimed the pan from Danger just in time to keep it from falling to the floor.

Domestic harmony reestablished, the Pack settled in for breakfast. Maya, Aletha’s screech owl, arrived with a letter from Augusta Longbottom, agreeing that Neville could come to stay with the Pack for the last two weeks of summer vacation. The Pack’s offer to take Neville shopping in Diagon Alley with them was gratefully accepted – she would send money with him to cover what he’d need – and she had no doubt of their ability to put him on the train for school.

“Second year,” said Sirius in satisfaction, surveying the breakfast table. “You’re going out for the team, aren’t you, fox?”

“Try and stop me.” Draco folded his buttered toast in half and took a bite.

“Ron probably will too,” said Hermione in a long-suffering tone. “I’ll have no one to talk to – they’ll all be Quidditch-mad.”

“I’m someone to talk to!” protested Meghan.

“You’re not going to be at Hogwarts, Pearl,” said Harry in a tone of someone hating to point out the obvious.

Sirius hastily cleared his throat, cutting off what Meghan had been about to say.

“You’ll have Ginny and Luna, Neenie,” said Aletha. “Or will it injure your reputation to be seen with lowly first years?”

Hermione bristled at the thought that she would be expected to care if her friends were first years, seventh years, or not even in school yet, then looked slightly shamefaced as she realized she’d been had.

“All these years in this house and she still has trouble being teased,” said Aletha after breakfast was over and the cubs, their punishment finished, had gone looking for their friends. “It must be a family trait.”

Danger threw a wadded-up toast ball at her Pack-sister.

“See?”

“If we can dispense with the pleasantries,” said Remus, smiling benignly at his Pack. “What did you have to tell everyone, love?”

“Oh, drat, I was supposed to talk to the cubs about it too – but I suppose we can catch them later. I was upstairs again last night.” Her lifted eyebrows made it clear she meant something different than the first floor of the Den. “And I got to watch the argument of the century – Alex vs. all. Apparently they were very put out with him that he didn’t tell them about something he came up with on his own. Secondary Heirs.”

“Secondary Heirs?” repeated Sirius. “What’s that, backups in case your primaries fail?”

“Something like that – he called it being a sort of cousin to the line, or being a friend of the family – he used you as an example, actually, mangy mutt. The way you lived with the Potters. It seems he made Harry a secondary Heir of Slytherin.”

Remus nodded. “That makes sense. Harry does have many Slytherin qualities. The good ones.”

Sirius looked down at his pendants a little regretfully. “Do you think I could become a secondary Heir of Gryffindor?” he asked. “Not that I don’t appreciate this, but I’d like a little reminder that it’s not all I am.”

“That was one of the topics of the argument,” said Danger with a smile. “The Gryffindors were saying that since we all belong to them, the adults and older cubs at least – there was general consensus that I would have been in Gryffindor if I’d gone to Hogwarts – they should have given us all secondary rights.”

"I was a little surprised to be tapped for Ravenclaw," said Aletha. "I do love learning, but I would never have thought of myself as that intellectual a type."

"So you wouldn't mind becoming Gryffindor secondaries, then?"

"Not at all," said Aletha, shaking her head.

"Mind?" was Sirius' incredulous comment. "She asks if I'd mind?"

"Hold still, then." Danger pointed her finger at first Sirius, then Aletha, and a thin lance of red light shot from it to them. "Look, I'm a ray gun."

"You need to make ray gun noises, then," said Aletha. "Like pshew, pshew."

"Why can't ray guns go bang, bang?"

"They just don't."

"Mine does." Danger aimed her finger at Aletha again. "Bang, you're dead."

Aletha obediently slumped in her chair. Sirius jumped up, his face filled with fury. "Hoy, you're not allowed to kill her! I'm the only one allowed to kill her! How would you like it if I went like this – pow!"

He aimed a shot at Remus, who dodged it and shot back, and the game was on. The Den was shortly filled with so-called adults chasing each other around, shooting pretend bolts of energy from their fingers, and having spirited arguments over whether or not they'd been hit. When a hit was declared, the person on whom it had been scored would flop over and "die" in agony, lie still for a few moments, then jump back up and start shooting again. Sirius was the first to make fifty "kills", and was thus declared the winner.

"How do people have fun who don't have a Pack?" asked Aletha rhetorically when they were relaxing after the game.

Danger "Gryffindorized" (Sirius' word) Hermione and Draco when they returned home for lunch. Oddly, the location of the differently

colored gem varied from person to person. For instance, Hermione's red gem was on the pendant that showed her Pridemates – the ones for her blood parents, her Pack-parents, and the Pack-friends had remained blue – while Draco's red one was on the medallion for the Pack-parents. Sirius', like Draco's, was on the pendant showing winged horse, wolf, and lion, whereas Aletha's resided above depictions of wolf, fox, cat, and doe.

Meghan was slightly put out that she didn't get the same treatment, but it was pointed out to her, ever so delicately, that she might not turn out to be a Gryffindor after all, that it was always possible she'd actually be Sorted into Ravenclaw.

"Possible, but unlikely," said Remus later, after Meghan's pouting fit had been dealt with. "With that determination to prove herself, she's more likely to become a Slytherin."

"No," said Sirius definitely. "I don't want her in that House. It's too dangerous."

"For Meghan, or for the rest of the students?" asked Aletha mischievously.

The next week and a half passed more or less pleasantly, with the cubs playing outdoors when it was fine and indoors when it rained, and laying deep, dark plans for the coming school year. Siss was seldom home this summer, taking advantage of the open fields around the Den to meander around and catch her own food. Harry knew how much the snake ordinarily disliked being cooped up, since it reminded her of the bin where he had found her at the Apothecary, so he encouraged her to get her roaming done while she could, as it would be difficult for her to get outdoors at Hogwarts.

Neville arrived by Floo two Sundays before term started, falling out of the Den's fireplace and narrowly missing being hit by his trunk. Trevor the toad erupted from his pocket and vanished into a corner of the music room, and everyone laughed, even Neville, as Harry and Ron helped him up.

Neville agreed to becoming a secondary Heir of Gryffindor, so Danger "zapped" his pendants as well, turning red the gem that was

set in the medallion with his Pridemates' carvings on it. His other three remained yellow – the one for his parents, which featured a wand shooting flowers and one shooting sparks, the one that was the same for everyone, and the blank one.

The Pack-parents, when asked, partially enlightened the Pride about the pendant that had puzzled them – it was representative of Pack-friends, apparently, with one of the birds being a phoenix, which stood for Dumbledore, the dragon meaning Hagrid, and the cat McGonagall.

"But what's the other bird, then?" asked Draco, examining it closely. "It looks a bit like a crow..."

"We've never figured that one out," said Danger quickly. "I suppose we'll get it eventually."

"All right."

It still seemed to surprise Neville that the Pride existed, and that he was part of it. For the first few days at the Den, he didn't speak up much, and acted startled when people asked him questions or chose him for their team at something. Harry was a bit ashamed when he realized that part of Neville's attitude was due to him and the others, that they had been more tolerating him than really being his friend over the past year. But that would change, now that they were the Pride.

Neville didn't have his own broomstick, but that didn't matter, since Harry's old Nimbus One Thousand flew just fine. Initially, he was a bit hesitant to fly – he hadn't improved much from his first disastrous flying lesson over the course of the year – but seeing the rest of the Pride in the air, even Hermione, seemed to spark his interest, and with more or less patient coaching from the other boys, he managed to get into the air without running into anything or falling too often.

Still, Neville generally preferred to keep his feet on the ground. He would take part in relays or the occasional race, but stayed out of the games of Quidditch, cheering from the sidelines. He and Meghan were often to be found together, usually in the garden behind the Den,

either tending it or working on lessons – Meghan was teaching Neville to read music, in return for his going over his homework with her.

“Even if I won’t be entering Hogwarts for two more years, that’s no reason I can’t start learning now,” she said with dignity.

It was amazing, thought Harry, how often Meghan could ask just the right questions to get Neville to see something that even Hermione had despaired of ever getting him to understand. It was as if she knew how his mind worked.

Their Hogwarts letters had arrived a day after Ginny’s acceptance letter on the eleventh of August. Neville had brought his with him, since it had his supply list in it, and for a wonder hadn’t misplaced it. They needed Volume 2 of The Standard Book of Spells, of course, and whoever the new Defense professor was, he or she wanted them to purchase The Dark Arts Outsmarted, by Gention Guartec.

“That’s quite a good book,” said Moony, reading over Draco’s shoulder. “It has sections for all skill levels – beginner to expert – so it should serve you for several years to come. Hang on to that one.”

Any Defense teacher whose book choice Moony praised was likely to be good, Harry thought, and thus it was in a cheerful mood that he arrived in Diagon Alley the Saturday after Neville had come to stay. Their first stop, of course, was Gringotts Bank, where Harry and Draco amused themselves by playing rock, paper, scissors to decide whose money they would use today. Draco’s rock broke Harry’s scissors, so it was to the Malfoy vault that the small, rattling cart took them.

“I must admit,” said Padfoot with an expression of satisfaction on his face as Draco returned from the vault with a bulging bag, “I do love spending Lucius Malfoy’s money.”

The bag was decidedly less full when Draco had split his haul into quarters (a share each for himself, Harry, Hermione, and Letha for various household expenses), but it was still quite a lot. Neville’s gran had gone to the bank for him before he’d left, so he had his gold with

him, and had stayed aboveground with Moony and Danger. Mrs. Weasley had taken another cart with her children and Luna, since Mr. Lovegood had gladly accepted her offer to do Luna's Hogwarts shopping.

They all met up on the marble steps of Gringotts in the gorgeous August sunshine. Draco offered to treat everyone to ice cream at Florian Fortescue's, and when they were all finished, Mrs. Weasley took Ginny and Luna in hand, off to do the traditional first year round of the stores. Hermione briskly removed Ron's nose from the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies, which was displaying a set of bright orange Chudley Cannon robes, and hauled him and the other boys into the stationery store next door to stock up on ink and parchment.

It was no surprise to anyone to find Fred and George with their friend Lee Jordan in Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, buying enormous amounts of Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks. "Are those things really as good as they say they are?" asked Draco, eyeing them curiously.

"Oh, they're great," said Fred. "Go off anywhere, and the stars stick around for half an hour at least. Why?"

"Oh, no reason," said Draco casually. "But I bet your mum would love to know you'd been buying all these."

George looked hard at Draco. "Are you trying to threaten us?"

"Why would you think that?"

Fred groaned. "How many d'you want?"

"The noble art of blackmail," said Draco airily as the Pride left the store, Ron carrying a bag with eight large fireworks in it.

Neville led them to a little junk shop where he said his gran often went, since you could sometimes get good bargains there. Hermione picked up a book and opened it, only to have it blow a raspberry at her, and Ron nearly got them all thrown out by experimenting with one of the broken wands.

“What on earth is going on up here?” said a disapproving voice from the back of the store after the shopkeeper had cleaned up the large purple frogs and left them with an admonition not to be playing with anything they weren’t intending to buy.

“Percy?” Ron squinted into the darkness. “What’re you doing in here?”

“I was reading, until you disturbed me,” said the middle Weasley brother rather irritably, emerging from the shadows.

“What are you reading?” asked Neville, looking at the little book hanging from Percy’s hand.

“Prefects Who Gained Power,” read Hermione aloud. “A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers.”

“Looking for role models, Perce?” said Ron.

Percy scowled at them all. “There are worse things,” he said, then turned on his heel and went back to wherever he’d been sitting.

“How can he see to read back there?” Harry wondered, peering into the gloom of the shop.

“Not our problem,” said Draco. “Let’s get out of here, unless anyone wants to get anything...”

“Percy ought to’ve been in Slytherin,” said Ron disgustedly as they returned to the sunny street. “He’s got enough ambition for the whole family – I think he’s hoping to be Minister of Magic someday.”

Their last stop was at Flourish and Blotts, where they had promised to meet everyone. As usual, Hermione gave a sigh of deep contentment as she walked through the doors. The only place Harry ever saw her happier was in the library at the Hogwarts Den, which he thought might be responsive to her very thoughts, since its ceiling had become nearly twice as high since they’d first found it, and it had

sprouted an odd wooden construction in one corner which looked surprisingly like Hermione's favorite reading tree...

They had tea at the Leaky Cauldron before returning home, supplies bought and another year at Hogwarts prepared for, as much as it could be. Harry challenged Ron to a game of wizard chess outdoors in the yard, while the others pulled out the Go Fish cards. Ginny excused herself from the game, and asked Hermione if she had a second to talk. Harry watched them go, until Ron's snicker and the yell of one of his pawns being taken pulled his attention back to the game.

"Is something wrong?" asked Hermione, closing the door of the cubs' bedroom.

"Yes. No. Yes." Ginny sat down on one of the beds.

"Well, it has to be one of those." Hermione sat on another bed, facing her friend.

"I don't know."

"Or it could be that."

"It's about Harry," blurted Ginny, looking up from the floor. "Hermione, I think I like him!"

Hermione nodded slowly. "Is this something new?" she asked, trying to keep her words from sounding hurtful. "You've been acting like you have a crush on him ever since you found out who he really was."

"I know – I did – I do – and I know I've acted like an idiot around him, I still do – that's what I wanted to ask you. What can I do? To make him like me?"

Hermione shook her head. "You're asking the wrong question," she said with certainty. "There's no way to make Harry do just about anything. But I know you didn't mean it that way, did you?"

"No, of course not – but that's the problem," Ginny confessed, shaking her own head. "I don't know what I mean!"

“Let me try, then?”

“All right.”

“You want to know how you can act so that Harry will like you. At least as a friend, if not the way you like him. Am I close?”

Ginny nodded.

“All right.” Hermione sat back on the bed, feeling more in control of the situation. If there was anything she knew, it was how Harry Potter’s mind worked. “I think you ought to start by just trying to be his friend. Can you do that?”

“I guess – but how, when I blush every time I see him?” Ginny was blushing a little just thinking about it. “I want to impress him, Hermione – I want him to like me – but at the same time, I don’t want him to notice me at all!”

“Well, you have a common interest. Quidditch. Start with that. Ask him something about one of the teams – anything you like.”

“But what if he thinks I’m stupid?” The last word was almost wailed. “I’m a girl, I’m younger than he is, he won’t want to talk about Quidditch with me!”

Hermione smiled knowingly. “Ginny, trust me, Harry would talk about Quidditch with a blind slug if it knew what it was talking about.”

Ginny made a face. “Thanks.”

“I didn’t mean that the way it sounded – sorry... Or you could talk about these.” Hermione tapped her pendants. “You were the only girl to get chosen Heir of Gryffindor. All the rest of us were Ravenclaw. Why was that?”

“I don’t know...”

“That’s not the point. The point is, it’s something to talk about. Something Harry will be interested in.” Hermione rubbed a knuckle along her lips, then decided to tell the younger girl something she’d noticed. “Harry wants to be your friend. I’m almost certain of it. But when you blush and run away, he thinks that means you don’t like him.”

Ginny looked horrified.

“Exactly. He doesn’t know how to deal with it, so he ignores you. But if you just try to be his friend – even if you feel like you’re putting your foot in your mouth so deep you could tie your shoes with your tonsils – he’ll try to be yours.”

Ginny giggled at the image.

“And with both of you trying, I think something could get done,” Hermione finished.

“Do you think I’ll ever get over this?” Ginny asked a bit wistfully. “The blushing thing?”

“Only one way to find out.” Hermione stood up. “Come on, let’s get started.”

The girls came down the stairs and out the front door. Harry and Ron were sitting in the shade of one tree, and the Go Fish players in another. Hermione and Ginny made their way over to Harry and Ron and sat down beside them.

Ginny looked over the chessboard carefully. “He’s setting you up, Harry,” she burst out suddenly, just as Harry was about to make his move. “Queen-side castle.”

Harry jumped a bit at this and looked at Ginny in surprise, then looked down at the chessboard and groaned. “Ron, you prat – how’d I miss that?”

“Thanks a lot, Ginny,” said Ron, scowling, as Harry directed a bishop to remove the offending castle.

“Yeah, thanks, Gin,” said Harry, smiling at her. Predictably, Ginny blushed, but managed a creditable return smile as well. Hermione gave her a thumbs up when the boys weren’t looking.

It’s a start.

Over the last week before school, Ginny initiated three more conversations with Harry, the last of which, on Friday, lasted nearly an hour and got rather heated, as she and Harry debated the virtues of various Quidditch teams – Ginny was a fan of the Holyhead Harpies, because of their all-witch hiring policy, while Harry, like his godfather, supported the Ballycastle Bats. They only stopped arguing when Letha firecalled the Burrow to bring the cubs home for dinner.

After dinner, Moony and Padfoot came upstairs to levitate the cubs’ Hogwarts trunks out of the attic so they could start packing. As Harry crawled out from under his bed, covered in dust mice and with three socks and a piece of last year’s Transfiguration homework in his hand, he noticed Hermione flipping through a stack of parchments, muttering to herself.

“Something wrong?”

“No... not really... do you remember the first letter the Pack-parents wrote us at Hogwarts?”

“Sort of. Why?”

“Well, I could have sworn I kept every letter they sent us, but I can’t find that one.”

“Maybe Draco has it,” suggested Harry.

“No, he never keeps things like that. You didn’t take it, did you?”

Harry shook his head, sending dust everywhere. “If I did, I don’t remember it.” He sneezed.

“Gesundheit,” said Hermione. “Hold still.” She came over to him and started brushing him off. “If we were at school, I’d Scourgify you, but

we're not, and I'd rather not get in trouble two days before a new year starts. There, that's better."

Moony appeared in the doorway, levitating two trunks with his wand, one stacked on top of the other. Padfoot was right behind him with the other one. "At the foot of the beds?" asked Moony.

Harry shrugged. "I guess."

Padfoot set down Hermione's trunk and reached into his pocket. "Got something here," he said. "At least I think I do – ah, there it is." He pulled out a miniature trunk, in every way the duplicate of the three already in the room.

"Is that for Meghan?" asked Hermione, smiling.

"Yes, actually." Padfoot set it on the floor at the foot of Meghan's bed. "Engorgio." The trunk grew to normal proportions.

"Why does she need a trunk?" asked Draco, coming in from the hall.

"We just thought she should have one," said Moony, with his favorite secretive smile.

The cubs exchanged a three-way look that said as clearly as words, Pull the other one. The Pack-parents were without a doubt up to something.

"Hermione, have you seen my blue robes?" asked Meghan, trotting into the room.

"No, I haven't – what are you doing?"

Meghan had pulled open a drawer of the bureau the girls shared and was busily removing armfuls of her underwear. "Packing," she said, as if that should have been obvious.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Hogwarts, of course."

“Of course,” repeated Hermione bemusedly. “Of course.”

“Pearl, you’re too young,” said Harry as kindly as he could. “They won’t take you.”

“I’m too young to be a student,” said Meghan, dumping the underwear into the trunk and returning for another load. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be a guest.”

Draco shook his head. “Do you really think they’ll just let you be a guest there all year?” he asked. “Without doing anything?”

“Don’t be silly, I’ll do things. I can run errands, or help Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing, or Madam Pince in the library, or even help Hagrid take care of the vegetable gardens. I can do lots of things.”

As one, the older cubs looked at their Pack-fathers, who were listening from the doorway. “She’s not, really,” said Harry. “She’s just playing. Right?”

“Now why should we tell you that?” asked Padfoot. “It would spoil all the fun.”

“Gangway,” called Letha from the hall, and Moony and Padfoot moved aside to allow her through. She was levitating a large basket piled with clean clothes, which she parked on Harry’s bed. “Good for you, sweetheart, getting started. Here’s the rest of your clothes – and yes, your blue robes are in here, I found them under the stairs.”

“Thanks, Mama Letha.”

“And for you,” said Letha, levitating a pile towards Draco. “And you.” Hermione caught her pile carefully. “And the rest are yours, Greeneyes. Remember to leave two changes out for tomorrow and Sunday.”

“Letha, is Meghan really going with us to Hogwarts?” asked Draco, dropping his clothes onto his bed.

Letha shook her finger in his direction, smiling. “Shame on you, little fox, trying to get around us like that. You ought to know, if one of us won’t tell you something, neither will the others.”

Harry sat down hard on his bed. A realization had just struck him.

I never did what I wanted to at Neville’s house. I never told him, or the others, about the prophecy.

I was going to do it after we made the pendants, so I could swear them to den-secrecy – I guess I wasn’t expecting to get kidnapped in my dreams by the Founders of Hogwarts...

It’ll have to be tomorrow.

“Everyone be quiet,” said Luna the next morning as the cubs and Neville arrived at the Weasleys’ orchard. “Harry has something important to tell us.” She looked at Harry. “It’s safe to talk here. No one is nearby.”

Harry closed his mouth. The one Ravenclaw daughter did say Luna was a seer. I guess she saw this.

“It’s about me and You-Know-Who,” he said, opting not to make waves – what he had to tell would be bad enough. “About why he tried to kill me when I was a baby, and again in June.”

The Pride gathered into a circle to listen to the prophecy.

“You can beat You-Know-Who?” said Ron, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and admiration. “Wicked!”

“Oh, Harry,” breathed Hermione. “This is awful. Does it mean he’ll come after you again?”

“Probably. He’s not going to want to wait for me to grow up – the older I get, the more I know, and the better fighter I’ll be.”

“I’ll fight with you,” said Meghan, hugging Harry. “He’ll have to go through me first.”

Draco met Harry's eyes and gave him a small, understanding smile.

"You're a good fighter now, Harry," said Neville. "You're really fast with your wand."

"Thanks." Harry tried to smile at the other boy. "There was one other thing about the prophecy, though. It might not have meant me. That's why I'm telling you all. There was another boy it could have meant. Another boy born at the end of July that year, whose parents were fighting Vol – sorry, You-Know-Who – and had gotten away from him three times."

He looked at Neville. Everyone looked at Neville.

Neville's eyes were very big, his face was white.

"Me?"

"Is there any more to it?" asked Draco. "Something that might say which one of you it is?"

"I know there's more, but the Pack-parents didn't tell me. They said they'll tell me when I need to know."

"The prophecy speaks of Harry," said Luna, making everyone whip around to face her. Her eyes were oddly unfocused, as if she were not using them at all, and she had her head tilted to one side, as if listening hard...

"And I shall speak to you again, little seer, so heed my voice well when you hear it."

Sophia Ravenclaw's words came back to Harry, and he shivered slightly.

Luna must be hearing her now... I wonder what that's like, to hear voices no one else can hear?

"Have I judged the day correctly?" asked a voice by his leg.

"Siss! You scared me – shh, Luna's telling us something..."

"The prophecy speaks of Harry, not of Neville," Luna repeated. "But it could have spoken of Neville. Once, it could have – but the Dark One's own actions chose his destiny and his doom." Her voice fell into a poetic cadence.

"Cat and dragon, phoenix bright,

"And raven, once redeemed from night,

"Twin and warrior, star and truth,

"Shall guard the Pride through days of youth.

"Silver pearl and silent snow

"Shall help to make the darkness go,

"But black to red and red to brown

"Shall truly bring the darkness down."

Luna blinked a few times, then looked around the circle. "Why are you all looking at me that way?" she inquired. "I didn't think it was so bad a verse as all that."

"It's not that," said Neville, closing his mouth. "It's... you made a prophecy. Right here in front of us."

Luna nodded. "I might do it again sometime, you know," she said. "Whenever Sophia tells me to, I have to."

"Hermione, did you get that?" asked Harry, shaking off his feeling of being in a trance himself.

Hermione nodded. "I don't know what it means, but I could recite it."

“Oh, come on,” said Draco impatiently. “Cat and dragon, phoenix bright – it’s talking about our pendants, about the Pack-friends. What’s the next line? Something about a raven?”

Hermione and Luna both nodded.

“So that must be what the other bird is. But we still don’t know who it stands for.”

“We’ll probably find out when we need to,” said Harry.

“Star and truth are Dadfoot and Mama Letha,” said Meghan. “For what their names mean.”

“What were the other ones on that line?” Ron asked Hermione. “There were four, I think.”

“Twin and warrior.”

“That would probably be Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger, then, wouldn’t it? If the other two are Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha?”

“Remus means twin, of course,” said Hermione, hitting herself lightly on the forehead. “And Gertrude means warrior woman. That’s who that is.”

“Doesn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know,” said Draco. “They take care of us and make sure we don’t get ourselves into anything we can’t get out of.”

“Who’s the end part, then?” asked Ron. “Silver snow or whatever it was?”

“Silver pearl and silent snow,” corrected Hermione. “I don’t know.”

“Pearl is me,” said Meghan. “Could silver mean Moony somehow?”

“Maybe.” Harry frowned. “Maybe not. What was the other line, the one with the colors?”

“Black to red and red to brown,” said Luna.

Ginny looked around the circle, swallowed hard, and went into a coughing fit. Ron thumped her on the back. “Are you all right?” he asked her when she’d recovered her breath.

“Fine – something caught the wrong way in my throat.”

“Did you think of something?”

“I thought I did, but I forgot it. Sorry.”

“Silent snow,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “But when is snow noisy?”

“Try to remember,” Ron encouraged Ginny. “Really try.”

The circle fractured into two smaller ones, each with its own conversation going on, both of which excluded Harry. He changed positions and lay on his stomach, lowering his arm to the grass. “That was exciting,” he remarked sibilantly.

“How so?” Siss wound herself around the proffered wrist.

“Luna future-saw. Or maybe it was past-seeing, I don’t know. She said the future-seeing about me is really about me, and not about Neville...”

Explaining the prophecy to Siss in terms she understood took a little while, and she was more or less unmoved when Harry finished. “All of life is fighting, eggling. A fight to survive, to continue living. You will fight well and strongly. I know you.”

“Thanks. I hope I will.”

The next morning was more or less chaotic, as mornings, in Draco’s experience, often were at the Den, but more so even than usual, since this morning brought with it the stress of getting five trunks (the Pack-parents levitated Meghan’s out as matter-of-factly as any of the other four) down the stairs and into the front hall, from whence they couldn’t go any farther until Mr. Weasley arrived with the car, since it was drizzling out.

Padfoot and Letha would be staying home this year, to save space in the car, since even Mr. Weasley's magical modifications had limits, and fifteen people, eleven trunks, two owls, a snake, and a toad would push right up against those limits. Draco was watching, but they kissed Meghan goodbye as earnestly as they did all the other cubs. If Meghan going to Hogwarts was a joke, it was one of the best the Pack had ever played.

Neville emerged from the ground floor bathroom, triumphantly holding a squirming Trevor in both hands, at about the same time as the Weasleys' car finally pulled up in the front yard, honking its horn to the tune of "Oranges and Lemons". Padfoot and Letha held the rain off with their wands while Moony and Danger levitated the trunks into the boot and the cubs got into the car with their friends.

Hermione and Meghan got into the front seat, where Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were already sitting; Harry and Neville climbed in the driver's side back door to sit next to Ron; and Draco went around the other side of the car to get in by the other door, where Luna was waiting for him.

"I'm excited," she said when he had shut the door behind himself. "Are you excited?"

"Yes. Very."

"Even though it's your second year?"

"I don't think you ever really stop being excited about going to Hogwarts." Draco allowed his eyes to wander through the car until they lit on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. "Unless you were never excited in the first place."

Luna followed his gaze and giggled.

"Where's your dad?" asked Draco, realizing Mr. Lovegood was not present.

“He said goodbye this morning, before the Weasleys picked me up. Like Neville’s gran did before he came to stay. He trusts your family and the Weasleys to get me on the train safely.”

“We’re going to need to make up time, we’re running late,” said Mr. Weasley as Moony got in next to Draco and Danger joined the other women in the front seat. He glanced over meaningfully at Mrs. Weasley.

“No, Arthur,” she said sternly. “Not in the middle of the morning.”

“But I’ve got the Invisibility Booster all set here – that would get us above the clouds – ten minutes, that’s all it would take–”

“I said no – do you want to get a caution from your own office?”

They pulled up in front of King’s Cross at ten forty-five. Moony and Mr. Weasley brought back trolleys for all the trunks, and they hurried into the station in a long, strung-out line, Weasleys first, Luna and Neville next, Pack bringing up the rear.

Draco hurried through the barrier between platforms nine and ten at two minutes to eleven and shoved his trolley up next to the door, hoisting his trunk inside, where Ron and Fred grabbed it and started hauling it down the corridor. He quickly pushed his trolley aside to make room for Hermione’s, and then for Meghan’s – but surely Moony and Danger wouldn’t let her actually get on the train...

But Moony was nowhere to be seen, and Danger was hugging Hermione good-bye as George and Neville pulled Meghan’s trunk on board. Meghan herself ran over to Danger to claim a hug of her own, and Draco followed her. “Where’s Moony?” he asked.

“He’s been delayed in the station – but he sends his love – good-bye, cubs, be good and have fun–”

“How are we supposed to do both?” asked Meghan.

“And I’ll see you at your first Quidditch match if not sooner–”

The departing whistle blew. "Hurry, get on!" Danger exclaimed, hugging them all once more, then shooing them quickly towards the train. Meghan leapt aboard, then Hermione, and Draco swung himself up just as the Hogwarts Express started to move. He leaned out the door to wave goodbye to Danger and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut it behind himself as the train started to pick up speed.

The Pride had managed to get themselves into one compartment, though there wasn't much room left over. Ginny, Luna, and Meghan were all chattering at one another, while Hermione read and Ron and Neville talked about Quidditch. It was so crowded, and so very ordinary, that it took Draco a few moments to realize what was causing his feeling that something was wrong.

"Where's Harry?" he asked.

(A/N: Ah, cliffies. Don't you love them. Mucho advance warning – horrendous cliffie on Chapter 27. At which point I may actually take that break. Or I may not. Depends on how evil I'm feeling, and how much I have to do.

I love my reviewers, and my lurkers – but I'll love you more if you review! And the Yahoo group is not gone – click on my homepage link, it's there! And if you really want a long detailed thing about the Pack- and Pride-pendants, I can put it up there... and today's topic is pig feet...

35 days left! Everybody say "YAY!"

Oh yes, and the game the "adult" Marauders play is loosely based on the video game "Halo". Very loosely. But I still don't own it.)

Chapter 23: Surprise

Harry sneaked a look at his watch as he rattled his trolley into crowded King's Cross. 10:56. He had four minutes to get to platform nine and three-quarters.

The trolley hit a bump and Hedwig screeched as her cage almost fell off Harry's trunk. Moony, who had been alongside Hermione, turned around to come to Harry's aid. "I'll take her," he said, lifting the cage from the trolley. "We need to keep moving."

Harry pushed the trolley, then frowned. "It's stuck."

"Stuck?"

"I think one of the wheels is jammed."

Moony put Hedwig back on the trunk and bent down to have a look. "Sure enough," he said. "Hold on a second." Harry saw him pull out his wand and tap the wheel in question, then stand quickly up. "Try it now."

But before Harry could push on the trolley, matters went entirely out of his control. A voice shouted, "Out of my way, Mudblood!" and something large and heavy cannoned into him from one side, knocking him to the floor and winding him.

"Sorry," said another voice, sounding distressed. "Sorry – are you all right? I didn't mean to, he pushed me..."

"All right," gasped Harry as the weight moved off him. Moony had helped the other boy to his feet, and was now offering his hand to Harry, who took it, got up, and looked around.

He had been run into by Dudley Dursley.

Who was currently staring in dismay at his own trolley. It had been tipped over, and his trunk had burst open. His clothes and schoolbooks were strewn across the floor.

“You’ll never make the train with all this to pick up,” said Harry, making up his mind in a flash. “I’ll help you.”

“No, you go – it doesn’t matter, I’ll phone my mum to pick me up, I’ll get to school some other way–”

“I’ll get you on the train, boys,” said Moony calmly, bending down to retrieve an armful of Dursley’s robes. “Let’s get this cleared up.” In between loads, he gave Harry the Marauder sign for “well done”.

With three of them working, it took only three minutes to get the trunk repacked, but that was too long. Harry groaned as the station clock struck eleven. “We’ve missed it.”

“Harry, do you really know me as poorly as all that?” asked Moony a bit challengingly. “I said I’d get you on the train, and I will. You too, Mr. Dursley – I believe that’s your name?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Remus Lupin. I’m one of Harry’s guardians.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.” Dursley shook Moony’s hand. “Can you really get us on the train?”

“Yes. Come on, boys, you’re about to do something that will make all your friends jealous.”

Moony led them out of the station, back across the road, to the Weasleys’ car. Harry brought his trolley around to the back of the car, but Moony shook his head. “I want them in the main compartment with you,” he said. “Trust me.” He helped them load their trunks into the back seat, then got into the driver’s seat. Harry sat in the front seat with Hedwig’s cage on his lap, and Dursley climbed in the other back door.

“Is something wrong?” Siss inquired from inside Harry’s shirt. “Should you not be on the school transport by now?”

“We got delayed,” said Harry as quietly as he could, to try and avoid attracting Dursley’s attention.

Moony started the ignition with his wand, then pressed a small silver button on the dash. Dursley made a funny noise as the car and its occupants vanished completely, even to themselves.

“It’s perfectly all right,” said Moony. “That’s the Invisibility Booster. Hold on, we’re going up.”

“Up?” repeated Dursley in a slightly wavering tone. “Do you mean this car—”

Moony must have stepped on the gas. The car rumbled and took off.

“Flies,” finished Dursley in a sort of half-awed, half-scared tone of voice. “It flies!”

“Yes, it does. We’ll catch up with the train, get you boys on board, and then I’ll take it home.”

“Is it yours?”

“It belongs to a neighbor of ours. We’re just borrowing it.”

Harry couldn’t resist. “Borrowing without permission?”

“And who said I didn’t get permission, you young scamp?” retorted Moony, chuckling. “Next stop, Hogwarts Express.”

“Harry?” asked Hermione, looking up from her book. “Isn’t he with you?”

Draco shook his head. “I thought he was with you.”

“He was right behind me in the station,” said Meghan. “Something must have happened to him – we’ve got to go back and look—”

“They’re not going to stop the whole train for one student,” said Ron. “Not even Harry Potter. Besides, Mrs. Danger’s there, and Mr. Moony. They’ll take care of it.”

"I hope he's all right," said Hermione anxiously.

"He'll be fine," said Draco with a confidence he wished he really felt. "He'll go to the Leaky Cauldron or something and Floo to Hogwarts – he'll be there hours before we are – probably have found out who the new Defense professor is—"

"He can't," said Meghan smugly. "The Defense professor won't be there until we are."

"Meghan Black, you are annoying when you know something we don't," said Ginny irritably. "Tell us!"

"I promised I wouldn't," said Meghan sweetly. "You'll just have to wait."

"Tell us this much, then," said Ron. "Is the professor on the train with us?"

"No."

"Then why won't he be there until we are?"

"That's a little sexist, isn't it?" said Hermione. "It could be a she."

Meghan giggled. "You're both wrong."

Six sets of eyes oriented on Meghan. "How can they both be wrong?" asked Neville in bewilderment. "Either the professor's a man or a woman."

Meghan shook her head, grinning all over her face. "Not telling any more," she chanted. "Not telling any more!"

"Oh, come on, that's not fair—"

"Come on, Meghan, please—"

"Just give us a hint—"

“Gave you lots already,” said Meghan cheerily. “Lots and lots and lots.”

“You did not, you only gave us a few—”

But not a word more would Meghan say, wheedle her as everyone might. Hermione soon tired of trying to get information from her and returned to her book, and the boys to their conversation about Quidditch.

Pearl can shut up tighter than a clam when she wants to – or maybe that should be an oyster. She’ll tell us when she’s good and ready.

After a few minutes had passed, Luna lifted her head from the latest edition of The Quibbler. “I hear something,” she announced.

“Something like what?” asked Hermione.

“Like a horn. A car horn. Playing ‘Oranges and Lemons’.”

Ron and Ginny looked at each other. “What would Dad be doing out here?” asked Ginny in confusion.

Just then, the horn honked again. This time, everyone heard it.

“It’s right beside us!” Ron stared out the window. “He must have it invisible – but why’s he here? Did we forget something?”

“Open the window!” called a muffled voice.

“Who said that?”

“It’s Harry!” Meghan cried happily. “Your dad must have brought him! Open the window, Ron, quick!”

Ron unlatched the train window and pushed it open. “Harry, is that you?” he called out.

“Yes – can you and Draco and Neville meet us at the door? We’re going to try to get on.” It was a bit unsettling, Draco thought, hearing Harry’s voice come from what looked like thin air.

“We?” asked Ron in puzzlement. “Who’s with you?”

“Never mind that now – can you do it?”

“Of course, we’ll be there straight away– door at the end of this car?”

“All right.”

Neville stood up and opened the compartment door, nearly falling out as he tripped over someone’s trunk. Draco stepped carefully over the trunk into the hall, and Ron followed him out. They made their way to the end of the car, to the door there, and Draco pulled it open just in time to see the Weasleys’ car shimmer into existence, flying directly alongside the train. He was a bit surprised to see Moony driving the car, and more than a bit surprised at the passenger in the back seat – what was Dudley Dursley doing here?

Harry waved from the front seat. “Can you get the trunks in first?” he called.

Ron nodded. “We’ll try.” He leaned down, holding onto the handrail, and unlatched the car door, then reached inside and grabbed the end of Dursley’s trunk, which was the first one there. He pulled it partway into the train, enough for Draco to get a hold on it, then changed his grip and pulled again, until Neville could catch the handle and help Draco haul it the rest of the way on board.

“Hold on a second,” shouted Dursley as Ron made to lean into the car for Harry’s trunk. It suddenly started advancing on them. Dursley must be pushing it from the other side, Draco thought. “Can you get it now?”

“Not quite – another foot or so–”

Dursley gave the trunk another good shove.

“There, that’s done it.”

Harry’s trunk was on board within a few moments. Dursley crawled along the seat until he was sitting next to the open door. Ron backed up, giving the other boy some room, and Dursley took a moment to nerve himself up, then jumped ponderously from car to train. Ron and Draco grabbed his wrists in time to keep him from falling back out again, and Ron reached out past him to shut the car door.

Moony tapped the brakes, bringing the front seat level with the train’s door, and Harry popped his door open, handing Draco Hedwig’s cage first, then climbing aboard himself, and turning back to slam the car door shut.

“Have a good term!” called Moony from the driver’s seat, waving at them and grinning.

“We will!” shouted Harry back.

Moony’s hand made a motion towards the dash, and the car and its driver vanished. Harry pulled the door of the train shut.

“That,” said Ron in tones of admiration, “was brilliant.”

The first thing Dursley did when they had all gotten out of the little stairwell was apologize to Draco for the blindfolding incident last year, and to Neville for laughing at him.

“I thought I wanted to get in with Nott and his crowd,” he said. “But you were right with what you said that day before Easter. I would only ever have been a bootlicker if I’d stayed with him. I wised up over the summer, stopped answering his letters, especially when he started talking about me being useful to him – I didn’t want to be his dog.”

“Good on you,” said Harry.

“But he didn’t like it. So he had Goyle tip my trolley over in the station today, and Crabbe knocked me off my feet. And I don’t think it was a coincidence that he knocked me into you, Potter – Nott blames you for Slytherin’s losing the House Cup last year – did you really stop Quirrell and Lockhart from stealing something valuable?”

“Sort of. It’s kind of complicated, though, and I’m not really allowed to talk about it.”

“All right. Thanks for getting me on the train.” Dursley set off in search of somewhere to sit, and Harry and the other boys went down the hall to their own compartment, where the girls hugged him and fussed over him at length.

“It was funny, though,” he said later, while he was telling the story of their short flight in the Ford Anglia. “I think Dursley heard me talking to Siss. And he may have seen her, while he was helping you get the trunks on board. But he didn’t say anything about it.”

“He’s a Muggleborn,” said Hermione. “He may not know about Parseltongue.”

“He’s a Slytherin, though,” said Draco thoughtfully. “You’d think he’d have heard of it...”

Remus Apparated into the music room of the Den and luxuriated for a moment in the quiet of the house. It might get on his nerves after a while, he knew, but for the time being it was very pleasant indeed.

A querying thought found Danger asleep, napping, so she was probably on one of the couches instead of upstairs. He went looking.

She was in the living room, one hand close to her mouth in a strangely familiar pose.

It seems Hermione comes by it honestly.

Her Pack-pendants had fallen out of the loose neck of her blouse, and were hanging down from the couch by their chain. Remus bent to restore them to her, then frowned. Something about them looked odd...

Oh, you mean I haven’t told you this story?

No, I don’t think so.

You'll get a kick out of this. I told you about witnessing a truly amazing argument upstairs, didn't I?

Yes.

What I failed to mention was that the argument also involved me. This statement was accompanied by a complex mixture of emotions. Pride was involved, Remus discovered, as well as shame, embarrassment, surprise, and a very strong wish to simply fade into the background. You see... the thing is...

They all wanted you as a secondary Heir?

How'd you guess?

The fact that your pendants are currently polychromatic tipped me off.

For a while, I felt like the dress in Sleeping Beauty. Blue, pink, blue, pink...

How did it end?

Well, it seems the same tactic that works to stop the cubs fighting also works on the Founders.

Shouting "SHUT UP" at the top of your lungs?

Yes. But not for the same reason.

I would say not. Remus was hovering between being scandalized and amused, with amused tending to win.

The cubs listen to me because they know what I'll do to them if they don't. The Founders... well, they haven't been told to shut up by anyone who isn't one of them in such a long time that I think I got through on shock value alone.

So you ended up being secondaried to all four Houses?

Is that even a word?

Now it is. Are you?

Yes.

And still no word on what, if anything, this gives us?

No, but I have a feeling it'll come up eventually.

Things do have a way of doing that. "And you know, there's no reason for us to keep it quiet," Remus went on aloud. "We have the whole house to ourselves."

"Going to get a chance to see what our lives would have been like if my parents had never died, I guess," mused Danger. "If we had just met normally, fallen in love, gotten married."

"As they say, normal is overrated." Remus bent over to kiss Danger. "Do we know yet if the placement of the colors means anything?"

"Sort of. It means how you tend to act around those people. For instance, my red is on the one with the cubs. I'm my bravest around them, because I'm partially responsible around them. Yellow on the one with you and Sirius and Letha – I guess because I'm the dependable, homebody type in this Pack. Blue for my parents, because we loved learning things together, and green for the Pack-friends. I suppose that means I'm supposed to try to out-Slytherin old Grumpy?"

Remus snickered.

"What?"

"Trying to imagine his face if you called him that. Not just Grumpy, but Old Grumpy."

"Old Grumpy Guts," said Danger promptly, making her husband laugh even harder. "Old Greasy Grumpy Guts."

Stop it before I kiss you.

What kind of threat is that?

One that I hope you'll make me follow up on.

Old Greasy Grimy Grumpy Guts.

That'll do it.

The Den lay peaceful in the afternoon sunlight.

The train ride passed pleasantly and uneventfully after Harry's arrival. The lunch cart came by, and conversations began and ended, along with games of Exploding Snap and Go Fish, until Ron looked out the window and announced that they were almost there, and there was a mad rush to get changed into robes. Neville accidentally gave Luna a bloody nose with his elbow, and apologized profusely.

"It's quite all right," she said, holding against her nose a wad of tissue, which Hermione had produced from her trunk. "Come here a second."

Neville stepped closer to her, and Luna pulled up the sleeve of his robes, took a butterbeer cap from her pocket, and without changing her expression in the slightest scratched his arm with it, drawing blood. Neville yelped and tried to pull away, but Luna wasn't finished. She took the tissue from her nose and dabbed it against the scratch.

"There," she said in a tone of satisfaction. "Now we're blood brother and sister." Everyone except Neville found this amusing.

Meghan, instead of changing into Hogwarts robes, had donned her best blue ones, and was looking quite excited indeed. Feeling silly, Harry offered her his arm, which she took grandly, and escorted her out into the hall. Ron and Ginny followed them, Ginny looking almost sick with apprehension. "Getting Sorted doesn't hurt?" she asked Ron one more time.

"Not a bit," Ron told her. "It can be a little scary – everyone looks at you – but it's over quickly. Don't worry, Gin, you'll be a Gryffindor."

Draco and Hermione were the next pair out of the compartment, Draco carrying Hedwig's cage. "How do we get up to the school?" asked Hermione. "I know only the first years take the boats."

"Boats?" repeated Ginny, sounding interested.

"Hagrid takes you," said Harry quickly.

"There's carriages for us," said Ron. "Fred and George say they move on their own – no horses, no drivers – or if there are horses, they're invisible or something."

Neville and Luna came out of the compartment last, Luna holding Trevor. Her nose had stopped bleeding. "I'll see you at the feast," she said, handing the toad over. "Have a good ride."

"Er, thanks, you too," said Neville weakly, hanging on to Trevor. "D'you think she's mad at me?" he said in an aside to Harry.

"Luna? No, she's just mad, full stop. You get used to it after a while."

Draco punched Harry on the shoulder with his free hand, a little harder than was really necessary. "Watch it."

"Watch what?"

Wrangling good-naturedly, they climbed out of the train with the rest of the school.

"Firs' years!" called Hagrid's booming voice. "Firs' years over here!"

"Good luck, Ginny," said Harry, smiling at her. "Good luck, Luna."

The rest of the Pride echoed him. Both girls smiled back a bit shakily. Even Luna's usual unflappable calm seemed slightly dented as they moved down the platform.

"Hagrid'll take care of them," said Draco. "He always does."

They waved to Hagrid. He waved back, and shouted, "Come down'n see me soon!" as they followed the flow of traffic out of the station.

Sure enough, horseless carriages were lined up along the road leading out of Hogsmeade to Hogwarts. Harry was about to join the queue for one, but Meghan grabbed his arm.

"Neville," she said, and Harry looked back at his friend.

Neville was staring at the carriages, or rather at the empty shafts of them, his mouth hanging open and his eyes very wide. "Ron, I thought you said there weren't any horses to the carriages," he said after a moment.

"There aren't."

"Yes, there are. Great ugly black things with wings."

"Neville, there's nothing there," said Meghan.

"What do you mean, nothing there – they're all hitched to the carts! Right in front of us!"

Harry and Draco traded unhappy looks. The last thing they needed was for Neville to start losing his mind.

"Neville, why did you say they were ugly?" asked Hermione.

"Because they are. They're so thin – it looks like their skin is right over their skeletons. No flesh at all."

"Come on, let's get a carriage before they all go," said Ron.

"Black winged horses," muttered Hermione as they climbed into one of the last carriages, Neville still looking uneasily at the place where he claimed the horse was. "Skin over bones – Neville, can I ask you kind of an odd question?"

"All right."

“Have you ever seen anyone die?”

Neville blinked. “Yeah. My granddad. When I was about four. First he was breathing, and then... he wasn’t.”

Hermione gave a sigh of satisfaction. “Thestrals,” she said. “I thought I remembered Hagrid saying once he had a herd of thestrals in the Forest. Thestrals are only visible to people who have seen death.”

“But then we should all be able to see them,” objected Harry. “All except Meghan. After last year...”

“You were unconscious by the time Quirrell actually died,” said Hermione. “And we none of us saw what happened to Lockhart. Just... what was left. I think you have to see it happen, or know it’s happening, to count.”

“Well, this is cheerful,” said Ron grumpily. “Now that we know Neville’s not going out of his mind, can we please talk about something else?”

“All right,” said Draco. “Meghan, where are you going to sleep?”

“Gryffindor Tower,” said Meghan promptly. “Hermione’s dorm.”

“What!”

“You’ve only got four in there, there’s room for another bed.”

Hermione seemed about to protest, but subsided. “If I find even one thing different from the way I left it, I’ll know who to blame,” she said severely instead.

“I could have slept in the Hogwarts Den, but we didn’t want anyone else to know about it,” said Meghan innocently. “And they thought I’d be happiest in with you.”

“Who thought?” asked Harry.

Meghan giggled. “You’ll find out,” she sing-songed. “You’ll find out!”

The carriages were soon pulling up in front of Hogwarts Castle. It was a fine night, not terribly cool, and the moon only a few days away from full (the Pride would be denning all together, for the first time, on one of their first nights at Hogwarts), so no one was in a huge hurry to go indoors. What looked like the entire school, minus the first years, was milling about in front of the steps, friends who hadn't met on the train exclaiming over one another, girls embracing, boys exchanging handshakes and backslaps.

Draco climbed out of the carriage and accepted Hedwig's cage from Hermione, who climbed out after him. He looked up into the sky, frowning, as Neville clambered out, then handed Meghan down. "Something wrong?" Harry asked him.

"Not wrong. Not exactly. But I thought I heard something."

"Something? Like what?"

"Like a motor..."

Meghan, Harry noticed, was watching the sky to the south, staring over the lake eagerly, and he turned to face in that direction as well.

"I hear it too," said Ron to Draco. "What d'you reckon—"

"Oh, look, look!" cried Hermione excitedly, pointing out over the lake. "Look, everyone!"

Meghan squealed and clapped her hands, jumping up and down in excitement. "They're coming! They're coming!"

Who "they" were, Harry no longer had to ask. Not with what he could now see, and hear.

A motorcycle was racing along the surface of the lake, skimming the water with its tires. By the light of the moon, Harry could see that there were two people mounted on it, and although their helmets hid most of their faces, he would have bet his broomstick on their identities.

No wonder Meghan's allowed to live here.

The motorcycle pulled up, climbing steeply, then roared through the air towards them. The awed, chattering students parted to make space for it, and the driver set it down gently right in front of the great stone steps.

The passenger dismounted first and pulled off her helmet, Vanishing it with a careless wave of her wand. The driver, having set his kickstand so that his vehicle wouldn't fall over, climbed off as well and removed his own helmet.

There was a wave of "Oooh" as his face became visible.

Padfoot tapped his helmet twice with his wand, shrinking it to palm-size, then popped his seat up, dropped it into the cavity thus revealed, and shut the seat again firmly. "Good evening, everyone," he said pleasantly. "Shall we go inside?"

Meghan's smile could have lit the whole area if the moon hadn't been up, Harry thought. She was prancing as Padfoot and Letha led the students indoors. Draco opened Hedwig's cage before they went in, and the white owl nibbled his fingers affectionately and brushed a wing past Harry, Hermione, and Meghan as she flew off to the Owlery with the other student-owned owls. The cage went off to one side in the entrance hall – a house-elf would take it up to their dormitory later.

"Hello, Sirius," said Professor McGonagall, who was just coming down the marble stairs as they came inside. "Aletha."

"Minerva," said Padfoot with a smile, as Letha nodded graciously.

"I hope you didn't leave that disreputable thing of yours sitting in front of the steps for the first years to kick at," said McGonagall, a trifle testily.

Padfoot looked disturbed. "I suppose I should move it, then," he said, and hastily turned and went back outside.

“Excellent work,” said Letha. “Couldn’t have done better myself.”

“Thank you.” McGonagall added something under her breath that Harry caught by dint of being, at the moment, quite close to her.

“What did she say?” asked Ron as they passed into the Great Hall.

“She said, ‘I may survive this year after all.’”

“You didn’t know about... them. Right?” Ron’s expression suggested that if Harry had known and not told him, Ron, then he, Harry, was a git beyond the power of words to describe.

“Of course not. They didn’t tell us anything. I thought it might be someone I knew, but I had no idea it would be them...”

“And that’s why you said the new professor is neither a man nor a woman,” said Draco. “It’s both. They’re going to teach together, aren’t they? Like Quirrell and Lockhart?”

Meghan nodded. “I think so. And they’ll share the suite too.”

The Pride shuddered. “I didn’t need to be reminded of that, thank you,” said Hermione.

“But they weren’t... doing anything,” said Neville. “Right?”

“I don’t think they were,” said Harry as the Pride found seats at the Gryffindor table. “I think they were just sharing because they both had the connection with Vol – You-Know-Who.”

Draco agreed. “It was probably so he could keep an eye on both of them at once.”

“Wonder how he found Lockhart,” said Harry thoughtfully. “Quirrell said he found him – that’s Quirrell found You-Know-Who – when he was traveling and went to the wrong bit of forest. But I can’t see Lockhart in the forest. Not really.”

“And besides, he wouldn’t have been in the forest, after that,” said Draco. “He would have been with Quirrell.”

“So maybe Quirrell met Lockhart somewhere,” said Ron impatiently. “Who cares? I’m starving, I wish the first years’d hurry up and get here.”

Padfoot reentered the Great Hall and came along the Gryffindor side of it, nodding to the Pride as he passed them, on his way to the High Table.

Meghan was looking smug. “I’m breaking tradition,” she announced.

“How so?” asked Harry, knowing he was probably setting himself up for some kind of fall.

“I’m going to be the first witch ever to know how Sorting happens before I’m a first year myself.”

“True enough,” said Draco. “Better make it, the first one that we know about, though. I’d wager one or two kids found out over the years.”

“Maybe if they had parents who were pushovers,” said Ron.

“I like breaking tradition,” said Meghan, obviously reveling in saying startling things. “I want to do it a lot, all my life.”

“This from the person who always eats her meals in precisely the same order,” observed Draco in Harry’s ear.

“Look at Snape,” said Neville suddenly. “What’s wrong with him?”

The Potions Master’s face was twisted in lines of utter loathing. Following his line of sight, Harry was unsurprised to see that he was glaring at Padfoot and Letha, who were chatting animatedly with Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout respectively. “Nothing,” he said. “He always looks like that when he sees Padfoot.”

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” said Ron, “and he’ll get an ulcer.”

“Oh, Ronald,” groaned Hermione. “Are you ever going to grow up?”

“Hermione, I’m twelve! If I’m not allowed to be immature when I’m twelve, when can I be?”

“Besides,” said Draco before Hermione could answer this, “we don’t need him any grumpier than he already is.”

A careful lift of pale brows on the word “grumpier” banished all emotions but laughter, and just as it was dying away, a side door of the Great Hall opened to admit Hagrid, who went to his seat at the High Table, on the end beside Professor Sprout. Letha smiled and said something to him as he sat down, and a moment later, the main doors of the Great Hall swung ponderously open.

Professor McGonagall led the long line of first years up the aisle between the tables. Ginny and Luna were in the middle of the line, Luna looking very slightly unnerved, Ginny’s every freckle standing out in relief against her pale face. Harry grinned at her, and after a moment she smiled back, timidly.

Professor McGonagall fetched the Sorting Hat and its stool from the alcove where it had been sitting until now. The first years looked at it blankly, and everyone else expectantly.

The Hat straightened itself up and seemed to shake slightly as if looking about the Hall. Then the rip near its brim opened up, and the Hat broke into song:

The op’ning of another year

Brings once again my duties

Of welcoming to Hogwarts School

Our newest bucks and beauties.

The time has come for you to find

Where you would be best suited,

And in what House (to put it plain)
You soon will be included.
If bravado is quite your thing,
And daring deeds of do,
Then I believe that Gryffindor
Is just the place for you.
If you instead desire to learn
And spend your days in thought,
Then I'll send you to Ravenclaw,
Exactly as I ought.
Or if you don't mind working hard,
Perhaps with little fame,
The word I'll shout is Hufflepuff
When I have heard your name.
But if by chance ambition burns
Within your clever soul,
Then I believe that Slytherin
Will fit you, on the whole.
You've naught to fear – the Sorting Hat
Has never been off target!

So sit right down and try me on,

And hear me speak, and mark it!

Everyone applauded the Hat as it bowed to the four House tables, then to the High Table.

“Does it make up a new song every year?” asked Harry as he clapped.

“Fred and George say it does,” said Ron. “I suppose it gets bored in between Sortings. But it could just be reusing ones from a couple hundred years ago – we’d never know...”

Professor McGonagall had begun to call names from her scroll. Student after student was Sorted. Harry tuned out in favor of looking once more at the High Table. Letha caught his eye, winked at him, then flicked her eyes back to the Sorting. Harry looked at the stool just in time to hear the Hat shout “GRYFFINDOR!” Professor McGonagall lifted it away from the head of a small, mousy-looking boy, who tore over to the cheering Gryffindor table, looking terribly excited.

“What was his name?” asked Harry. “Did anyone catch it?”

“Creevey,” said Hermione. “Colin Creevey.”

“I think he’s Muggleborn,” said Draco.

“How can you tell?” asked Neville.

“Look how he’s looking around at everything. The ceiling, the candles, Hagrid.”

“Everyone stares at Hagrid a little when they first meet him,” objected Harry.

“All right, that’s true, but not everyone stares at things like the candles. And he almost tripped on his robes. He’s not used to wearing them. Muggleborn.”

“Lovegood, Luna!” called Professor McGonagall.

Luna stepped up to the stool, and the Hat fell onto her head. Harry sneaked a glance at Draco. His brother had all his fingers crossed in his lap and was muttering something under his breath. Harry would have been ready to wager it was “Gryffindor, Gryffindor, Gryffindor, come on, Gryffindor...”

The Hat opened its mouth, then closed it again.

“That’s odd,” said Ron. “It didn’t do that with anyone else.”

“Yes, it did,” contradicted Hermione. “Remember, Harry?”

Harry nodded.

“Who did it do that with?” Ron looked confused.

Harry jerked his head towards Draco.

“Oh. I thought you meant this year.”

The Hat straightened up once more. Draco inhaled sharply.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

The table burst into applause, the Pack clapping harder than anyone and giving voice to several joyous yells, as Luna walked unhurriedly over to them, smiling rather more broadly than usual. She intercepted Meghan’s joyous hug first, then Hermione’s, then accepted Harry’s and Ron’s and Neville’s handshakes and sat down next to Draco. “Here I am,” she said simply.

Draco grinned at her and offered her his hand. They shook heartily. “I was afraid you weren’t going to make it,” he said.

“The Hat didn’t want me to,” said Luna. “It wanted to put me in Ravenclaw. But I argued with it, and I won. Now we just need Ginny.”

This year there were apparently no last names beginning with X, Y, or Z (what kind of last name would begin with X, Harry wondered), and nothing starting with Wi or Wo, making Ginny the last to be called. She was not quite green, as Ron had been at his Sorting the previous year, but she went even a little paler than she had been before when Professor McGonagall read out, “Weasley, Ginevra!”

Harry discovered an intense interest in himself as to where Ginny would be placed. It was only natural, of course, since she was his Pridemate, and he was supposed to care about her as such... also, it would be more convenient, for Pride meetings and denning and such, if they were all in the same House...

“GRYFFINDOR!” announced the Hat.

Three Weasleys, four cubs, Neville, and Luna all screamed at the same time. Ginny ran into Ron’s waiting arms, laughing, and the Pride closed in around her, hugging her and pounding her on the back. Even Percy was cheering – he seemed to unbend somewhat where Ginny was involved, Harry had noticed...

Dumbledore was getting to his feet. “I can only echo the Sorting Hat, in saying, welcome to Hogwarts,” he said. “Welcome to those who are new, welcome back to those who are not, and with that being said, let all else be postponed until after we have taken care of the most important matter at hand. Supper.”

Plates and platters, bowls and dishes, appeared on the tables, all heaped high with delicious-looking food. Harry grabbed a few chops for himself before Ron could get at them – he knew from experience that once his friend got a hold of something, there wouldn’t be much left for anyone else – and served Meghan a spoonful of mashed turnips with his other hand.

“I don’t want these,” complained Meghan.

“They’re good for you.”

“I don’t care.”

Harry looked up at the High Table and caught Letha’s eye. Lifting Meghan’s plate, he pointed at it, at her, and at the bowl of turnips.

Letha looked straight at Meghan and mouthed, Eat it.

Meghan pouted. Letha gave her the look, and Meghan quickly started shoveling the turnips into her mouth, apparently on the idea that if she ate it quickly she wouldn’t have to taste it so much. “Maybe I should ask if I can eat at the High Table,” she said, swallowing a huge mouthful.

Draco laughed. “Pearl, you couldn’t even see over the High Table.”

Meghan picked up her goblet of pumpkin juice to take a drink. “Whoops.”

Draco glared at her and grabbed a napkin to mop at his robes.

“Meghan, have you tried the brown sugar on those?” asked Neville from down the table. “It makes them a lot better.”

“No, I didn’t even know there was any – where is it?”

Neville passed a small bowl piled high with coarse sugar crystals. Meghan took a generous pinch and sprinkled it over the turnips, then took a careful spoonful. Her eyes widened. “Much better,” she said, and applied the sugar liberally, stirring it in.

Harry gave Neville a thumbs up. Neville smiled back, then returned to his Yorkshire pudding.

He’s better at dealing with my little sister than I am.

Harry wasn’t quite sure if that bothered him or not.

He was just scraping the last bits of his treacle pudding off the dish with his spoon when things began to get quiet, alerting him that Dumbledore had just stood up again.

“There are start-of-term notices, as usual – first year students will kindly be informed that the Forest on the grounds is forbidden to all students. The rest of you will kindly be reminded, and perhaps this year the reminder will sink in.” This was patently addressed to a pair of identical redheads at the Gryffindor table, who looked innocently back at the Headmaster.

If they had spoken, Harry thought, Fred would have said, “Who,” and George, “Us?”

“Quidditch tryouts will be held in the second week of term. See your House team captain or Madam Hooch for more details.”

“Wood, right?” whispered Draco to Harry.

“Right.”

“And finally, introductions are in order. Professors Quirrell and Lockhart were unfortunately unable to rejoin us here at Hogwarts for another school year...” Dumbledore paused to allow the snickering to die down. “However, the arrangement of having two teachers in the Defense Against the Dark Arts post was highly successful. May I therefore introduce Professor Sirius Black and Professor Aletha Freeman-Black.”

Padfoot and Letha stood up as the school applauded them. Padfoot’s name, in particular, was buzzing about the Hall, usually with the adjective “cool” or “wicked” appended. Apparently, for some reason that escaped Harry, people thought it would be interesting to be taught Defense Against the Dark Arts by a man who had long been considered one of the Darkest wizards of modern times.

I’m just waiting until he pranks Snape.

“I wish you all a fine night of rest, to refresh minds and bodies and prepare them for another year of learning,” concluded Dumbledore.

The teachers began to get up, and the prefects started calling for first years to follow them. "We'll see you tomorrow," said Ron to Ginny. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." Ginny smiled at them all before hurrying over to Percy.

"Good night," said Luna. "Will I see you at breakfast?"

"I'll be here," promised Draco.

"We all will," said Harry, kicking his brother gently on the ankle. Don't make it too obvious you like her, fox, we'll have enough to deal with this year.

Part of what they had to deal with was beckoning them from the teachers' dais.

Meghan was already there, hugging Letha happily, as Harry, Hermione, and Draco caught up. "Surprise," said Padfoot, grinning at them.

"You're not kidding," said Draco.

"How are you splitting up the classes?" Hermione wanted to know.

"We're thinking we'll run joint lessons at the moment," said Padfoot. "Both of us doing them all, instead of splitting it up by year."

"That way, if we decide to change in the middle of the year, we'll both know what's going on in all the classes," finished Letha. "And one important thing. In private, you may call us what you always do, but in public, and especially in class, it's Professor. Understand?"

"Yes, Professor," said Harry.

"And no more PDA," added Padfoot. "We don't need people being reminded."

"Not even me?" asked Meghan sadly.

“Well, you’re a special case, Pearl.” Letha kissed the top of Meghan’s head. “But yes, in general, not even you. If you want some time with us, come to the office – you know where it is, I’m sure – and we’ll find time. But most of the time, we need to act like nothing more than teacher and student. All right?”

“All right,” said Draco.

“Yes, Professor,” said Hermione cheekily.

“One point from Gryffindor for disrespect to your teachers,” said Padfoot in a frighteningly good imitation of Snape.

“We’ll be good, Professor Black,” said Harry quickly. “We promise. Pack honor – Pack and Pride honor.”

“Pack and Pride honor,” the other cubs repeated.

Letha smiled. “Two points to Gryffindor, for a good recovery. But that’s the last time we favor you, understand?”

“Understand,” said the cubs, almost in unison.

“Good. Now – bed.” Padfoot made a shooing motion. “Before I change forms and chase you there myself.”

The cubs fled the Great Hall, laughing.

It was going to be a good year.

(A/N: Kudos to those who might already have figured out who the Defense teacher is – or teachers are – and to those who didn’t – surprise!

All the usual stuff – review, Yahoo, la la la, blah blah blah, cotton balls, and yes, I know I’m behind on review responses. I kind of figured you’d rather have another chapter. But they will be along ASAP! Promise!)

Chapter 24: Sparks Fly

The next morning was grey and overcast, making Harry feel rather sleepy on his way to breakfast. He would have been inclined to dismiss his recollection of his godfather and Pack-mother teaching Defense as an odd dream brought on by too much treacle pudding, but Meghan was sitting at the Gryffindor table between Hermione and Neville, cheerfully drowning her porridge in milk, and Letha was at the High Table, chatting with Dumbledore in between bites of bacon.

Padfoot was nowhere to be seen, but this didn't surprise Harry. His godfather was not by choice an early riser – in fact, Harry suspected that if Padfoot had his way, mornings would begin around eleven.

Hope he doesn't have too many morning classes.

Professor McGonagall was walking up and down the table, distributing schedules as students trickled in. Harry waited for her to come over to him, but she walked right by.

"I have it," said Hermione quickly before Harry could feel offended. "She gave me all of ours, to save time."

Harry accepted his and sat down, perusing it. Double Herbology was first on the list today, followed by Transfiguration, and then, after lunch, Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you doing today, Meghan?" he asked, helping himself to porridge.

"Starting work in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey says her potion shelves need reorganizing and cleaning."

"You sound excited," said Ron, arriving in time to hear this last.

"I am excited."

"About cleaning off shelves?"

"Why not?"

Ron looked at Harry. "You have a strange family," he said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "As if I didn't know."

Owls were streaming into the hall now, carrying letters and packages, dropping them near or on their recipients. Harry wasn't expecting anything, as half the people who usually wrote to him were here – Padfoot had just arrived in the Hall, robes not quite straight and hair in disarray. Letha looked exasperated when she saw him, and waved her wand at him, neatening him up a bit.

"We'll be working with more interesting plants this year," Neville was telling Meghan. "More really magical ones, instead of the Muggle things that have magical uses. I can't wait to get started."

Ginny came up the other side of the Gryffindor table and sat down opposite Harry. "Good morning," she said, sounding determinedly cheerful.

"G'mo'nin," Harry mumbled through a mouthful of porridge. At first he thought Ginny was staring at him, but then he noticed her eyes were directed over his shoulder. He swallowed and turned to see what had her interested.

Dudley Dursley had just come into the Great Hall and sat down at the Slytherin table. As soon as he had, everyone else sitting near there had moved. There was no one within ten feet of him on either side of the table.

"I suppose Nott's passed the word that no one's to have anything to do with him," said Hermione with a sigh. "Or his father did. I can't help feeling a bit sorry for him."

"He's a Slytherin," said Ron. "They're supposed to be so clever – let him figure a way out of this for himself."

Draco and Luna were the last members of the Pride to arrive for breakfast, and Harry frowned as he watched them come up the aisle between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables. They were talking as

they came, with their heads bent in towards one another, and they appeared to be...

They can't be. Please, no. Not in front of everyone...

As they drew closer, Harry sighed in relief. They were not, as he had thought at first, holding hands. Luna's robes were a bit too long in the sleeve, that was all, so he hadn't been able to see her hand, and Draco was simply walking close to her.

Very close.

Harry shook it off and said "Good morning" to them both as they arrived. Draco ducked under the table to sit next to Ginny, and Luna took a seat next to Harry. Hermione handed their schedules down the table.

"Bother, we've got Transfiguration today," groaned Draco.

"We have to have it sometime," said Hermione, returning to her eggs.

"Yes, but Transfiguration on a Monday – it's not fair."

"At least it's not Potions," said Ron.

"Amen," said Harry heartily.

"I don't understand why you don't like Potions," said Draco, pouring a glass of pumpkin juice. "I mean, other than Snape."

"And I don't understand why you don't like Transfiguration so much," said Harry. "It's not the easiest subject here or anything, but it's not as hard as you're always making it out to be."

Draco seemed about to answer this, but let it drop in favor of getting at his breakfast.

"This can't be right," said Ginny, perusing her schedule. "It says Astronomy class is at midnight on Wednesday."

"Why not?" asked Ron. "You can't do Astronomy in the daytime."

"We get to stay up all night?"

"Not all night," said Hermione. "It ends around one-thirty or so."

"You won't have any early classes on Thursdays," added Harry. "They know you'd never stay awake for them."

"Our first Defense lesson is on Thursday," observed Luna. "I think I'll like the new teachers."

Harry sneaked a glance up at the High Table just in time to see Snape's hair turn green as he took a mouthful of scrambled eggs. Padfoot was sipping his tea, looking quite pleased with himself.

"I think I'll like them too," Harry said.

Double Herbology was, for once, as interesting as Neville thought it would be. Professor Sprout took them to greenhouse three and had them repot Mandrakes. Hermione earned twenty points single-handedly by virtue of knowing the answer to everything Professor Sprout asked, and Ron seemed torn between admiring Hermione for the points she'd just gotten Gryffindor and being disgusted by her habit of knowing absolutely everything.

Mandrakes looked like completely normal plants, until you pulled them up. Then it was revealed that their roots looked like babies, and acted like them as well, wiggling about and crying. Harry had to assume the crying part, since Professor Sprout had them wearing earmuffs which blocked out all sound. This was because, as Hermione had informed them, a Mandrake's cry would kill you if you heard it.

The Mandrakes they were handling were quite young, Professor Sprout told them, so their cries probably wouldn't kill, but they could knock people out for a good four or five hours, and Harry didn't want to miss Padfoot and Letha's first lesson, so he made sure his earmuffs were on tight. He was grateful for Marauder signs, which made it possible for himself and his Pridemates to carry on a sort of conversation through class, and which allowed Hermione to tell Draco,

when his Mandrake bit him on his unprotected wrist, that they weren't poisonous at all.

"In fact, they're antidotes," she said after class, when they were hurrying up to the castle to wash up before Transfiguration. "Mandragora, that's what you call it when it's in a preparation, is a restorative, one of the most powerful. It reverses transfigurations and curses and things like that."

"So, if anyone was trying to poison you, you're all right now," said Ron.

"I'd almost rather have the poison," said Draco, making a face as he scrubbed the bite out with soap. "That hurt."

In Transfiguration, Harry found himself almost sharing Draco's feelings about the subject. He felt as if he was back at the beginning of his first year, with no idea even how to get started. The beetle he was supposed to be turning into a button nearly flew away twice, and he almost squashed it with his wand tip several times. The only real progress he made was having its shell develop four holes.

Ron and Draco were having similar difficulties, but Neville took the prize for most interesting mistake of the day when his beetle suddenly grew so large that his desk collapsed under the weight. Hermione, sitting behind him, pulled his chair back just in time to keep his legs from being trapped underneath it, scattering buttons everywhere as she did.

"How many did you do?" asked Ron in sheer envy.

"A few," said Hermione, ducking her head, as the bell for lunch rang.

They met the rest of the Pride-girls for lunch. Ginny and Luna were full of stories about their first morning at Hogwarts – they'd had Professor Flitwick for double Charms – and Meghan proudly reported that the first injury of the school year had been successfully treated.

"What was it, Pearl?" asked Draco.

“A Ravenclaw fourth year had a nasty hangnail.”

Ron nearly choked on his sandwich.

“A boy named Colin Creevey wants to meet you,” Luna said to Harry. “He’s in our class. He thinks you’re very special.”

“He kept asking us about you,” said Ginny, taking a drink of pumpkin juice. “Because he saw us sitting with you at breakfast. I told him...” The blush was back. “I told him to ask you yourself – I hope you don’t mind...”

Harry shrugged. “What’s he like?”

Ginny and Luna looked at each other. “Small,” said Ginny finally. “And eager.”

“He makes me think a little of a puppy,” said Luna. “He’s very excited by everything, and he likes to talk.”

“I think you’re about to find out for yourself, Harry,” said Hermione, nodding down the table.

The small, mousy-looking boy Draco had said was probably a Muggleborn was coming tentatively up the aisle, clutching a camera and looking rather awestruck. He turned red when he noticed that Harry was looking at him, but he kept coming.

“All right, Harry?” he said breathlessly. “I’m Colin Creevey—”

“I know,” said Harry.

“You do?” Colin looked amazed.

“Ginny and Luna were just telling me about you,” said Harry, indicating the girls. Ginny looked as if she rather wished he hadn’t. “They said you wanted to meet me.”

"I did – I do – everyone's been telling me about you. About what you did. How you stopped You-Know-Who and the scar you've got on your forehead and I was wondering – could I have a picture?"

"Of what?" asked Harry blankly.

"Of you – so I could prove we've met – or maybe could one of your friends take it, and I stand next to you?"

"Tell you what, Colin, why don't you wait until dinner," said Draco before Harry could say anything. "Then you can get one with Harry and Professor Black."

"Really?" Colin's face lit up. "That would be wonderful – I heard all about him too, how everyone thought he was guilty when he was really innocent, and how he's your godfather, and he stole you from your relatives and lived secretly in Professor Freeman-Black's house for years – someone said they had a daughter, that she was staying at Hogwarts since they're both teaching here—"

Meghan cleared her throat noisily. "Meghan Black," she said, holding out her hand to Colin. "Nice to meet you."

Colin shook her hand, beaming. "And – wait—" He turned back to Draco. "Someone said something about a boy who disappeared – who used to be named Malfoy—"

Harry had never been so happy to hear the bell for afternoon classes.

"We've got to go," said Hermione hastily, standing up. "We're going to be late for Defense if we don't, come on, everyone..."

"I'll see you at dinner, then, Harry," Colin called after them.

"Serves you right," Harry muttered to a slightly pink-faced Draco as they left the Great Hall. "Volunteering Padfoot like that, you know he doesn't like having his picture taken, and neither do I..."

"I was trying to get him to go away, in case you hadn't noticed. I don't like people staring at me any more than you do."

“Then maybe you shouldn’t walk around like you did this morning with Luna. You were about an inch away from her – what were you talking about that was so interesting?”

“Why’s that any of your business?”

“You looked like you were walking down a lovers’ lane somewhere. I thought you were holding hands. You can’t do that sort of thing in public.”

“Are you trying to tell me who to spend my time with?”

“No. I’m just trying to tell you that if you keep on doing things with Luna that way, people are going to notice.”

Draco scowled. “Why don’t you let that be my lookout.” He speeded up, turning a corner at the top of the stairs.

“You know he hates people giving him advice,” said Hermione, falling back slightly to walk beside Harry. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“He’s not the only one who hates it.” Harry knew he sounded disagreeable, and he didn’t care. The rest of the walk to the Defense classroom was silent.

Letha was already there, stacking the desks and chairs by the wall with her wand. “Good afternoon, everyone,” she said as the class filed in. “Leave your bags against the wall, please, and wands out. We’re going to do some preliminary testing today.”

“A test? Already?” Neville looked worried.

“Don’t worry,” said Padfoot, coming out of the door leading to the office, levitating a box beside him. “It shouldn’t be anything you can’t handle.”

Neville gulped a bit nervously as Padfoot lowered the box to the teacher’s desk, which remained in place. Letha opened the box, and she and Padfoot together distributed the things within, which looked

like miniature archery targets, to places against the two bare side walls of the classroom. Another wave of their wands, and the targets grew to full size – they must have been shrunk for storage, Harry thought.

“Everyone pick a target,” said Padfoot, waving at them. “Go on, they’re all the same.”

“Stand at the blue line,” added Letha, creating said lines on the floor about ten feet in front of each target.

It took only a few moments for everyone to find a place. This seemed interesting already.

“Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Padfoot. “I’m Professor Black, this is Professor Freeman-Black, and before you ask, yes, we are married.”

“If you happen to go to the hospital wing, you may see our daughter Meghan there,” said Letha. “She’s nine, and apprenticing informally to Madam Pomfrey, since she hopes to be a Healer after attending Hogwarts.”

“Now, we want to give you the best possible education in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Padfoot. “But to do that, we’re going to need to find out what level you’re currently at. There will be no points for today’s exercises, they’re skills testing only. We’ll do book tests next class.” His eyes flicked across Hermione as he said this. “After we tabulate your scores for both sets of tests, we’ll have some idea where to begin.”

“So, your first task today is in front of you,” said Letha. “You can all shoot sparks from your wands, I trust? Raise your hand if anyone can’t.”

Even Neville could manage that, Harry knew. No hands went up.

“Excellent. When we give the word, we want you to shoot sparks from your wands at these targets. They’ve been bespelled to record hits and misses, so we’ll know how often you can hit a stationary target.

Then, in the second round of testing, the target will move back and forth along the wall, and you'll have to try to hit it again. Then up and down, as well as back and forth, for the third round. You're to stay on your mark in these rounds, by the way."

"In the final round, you'll have a sort of shielded box to yourself and your target," Padfoot took over. "You can move around, try to chase it down, but it will be enchanted to avoid you as long as possible. Rather like a Golden Snitch. Your task is the same – hit it as often as possible with wand sparks."

"You'll have eight minutes in each round," finished Letha. "And there will be shields between you, so that you don't hit your neighbor's target – or your neighbor – by mistake. Does everyone understand?"

A wave of nodding heads and a few "Yes, Professor"s answered her.

"Very good. But before we get started, there's one thing we need to do. There's a number on everyone's target, and a list going around. Sign your name next to the number of your target on the list, so we know whose is whose."

Harry signed his name next to the number nine and passed the list to Ron.

"On your marks, then, everyone," said Padfoot, taking the list from Dean Thomas, at the front of the other side of the room.

Harry turned to face his target.

"Get set." A wave of Letha's wand set shields all down Harry's row, as Padfoot did the other side. "Go!"

Harry aimed and shot, aimed and shot again. Once he found his range, his target was soon speckled with little burn marks. Padfoot looked in on him, winked, and pointed his own wand at the target, briefly painting it with an image of Snape's face. Harry grinned and peppered the picture with sparks.

Eight minutes seemed too short. Neville's target had a fair number of scorch marks on it, but to be fair, so did Neville himself. Hermione's had neat little patterns of burn holes all around the bull's eye. Ron's had several fairly large burns in it, but the wall was somewhat darkened as well. Draco's looked rather like Harry's own, except, Harry thought with a bit of pardonable pride, his own target had more marks on it.

"Well done, everyone," said Padfoot, restoring the targets to their original pristine condition. "Round two – on your marks, get set, go!"

This was a bit more difficult. The target seemed to be waiting for Harry to point his wand at it before it moved. Still, it wasn't moving far, or fast, and Harry soon had its range again. He didn't score nearly as many hits this time, but neither did anyone else.

Round three was more difficult again. Letha hastily added roofs to their little cubicles of shields after a wild shot of Neville's went over the top of his "walls" and nearly set Lavender Brown's robes on fire. Harry was several times tempted to step off his mark, to get just one step closer to the target, but he knew that would likely be counted against him, possibly even considered cheating.

When the shields disappeared, Harry decided that the class could be divided into two general types – the ones who had tried to aim every shot they took, and the ones who had decided that if they just shot enough, something was bound to hit. The first type, which included all the girls, Draco, and Harry himself, had only a few marks on their targets, but they themselves were unharmed. The second, the other boys in the class, had a distinct odor of smoke about them.

"Final round," said Letha. "Everyone ready?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the class eagerly, almost in unison.

"This will be very difficult," warned Padfoot. "Some of you may not score at all. Remember, that won't count against you. This isn't for a grade, it's just so we know what level to start at. So – ready..."

Shields appeared all around Harry, turning everything outside them blurry and hard to see.

“Steady,” said Padfoot’s voice, a bit muffled now.

The target, once more brightly colored and spotless, whirred to life, leaving the ground and hovering in the center of the box.

“Go!”

The target spun around, presenting its back to Harry.

He had a nasty feeling that shots which scored on the back wouldn’t be counted, so he dashed around to the other side of the box.

And discovered the target’s back still facing him. It must have turned as he ran.

Harry stared at it angrily, then ran around it again, getting the same result. He swore under his breath. How was he supposed to score on it if he couldn’t get at it?

Then he had an idea. He began to run slowly, around and around the target, always in the same direction, forcing it to turn continuously – then, suddenly, stopped and ran the other way. The target continued to turn in the original direction for a moment before it caught up with Harry’s movement.

A moment was all Harry needed to get off three good shots.

Unfortunately, the target seemed to learn from its mistakes. Harry had to think up new ways to get shots in. He was just running out of ideas when Letha’s voice called “Time!” and the shields vanished.

Hermione’s target had only one small burn on it, out on the left rim. She looked close to tears. Ron was limping on one foot, but his target was respectably marked, including one quite near the bull’s eye. Draco’s had a few good-sized burns, but nothing closer to the center than the second ring. Portions of Neville’s robes were missing entirely,

but his target had a large section right of center completely burned out.

Harry looked again at his own. The center ring had two or three shots in it, with several more nearby, and a few random shots over the rest of the target. He felt quite proud of himself.

“Well done,” said Padfoot, collecting the targets from one side of the room with a wave of his wand, as Letha did the other. “Remember, we’ll be book-testing on Wednesday – class dismissed.”

“You need the hospital wing,” said Harry to Ron, offering his arm, as they left the classroom. “What did you do, burn through your shoe?”

Draco snickered.

“It’s not funny,” said Ron angrily. “Bloody target flew between my legs – I’m lucky I didn’t burn anything else.”

All the boys winced.

In the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey sent Meghan for a certain salve, which she applied to Ron’s foot, making him sigh in relief. “Playing with sparks,” she muttered to herself. “Still, they seem to have some semblance of ideas about safety – at least they had you shielded...”

“How did you do, Neville?” asked Meghan, closing the pot of salve.

“Not so well,” said Neville.

“Not so well?” repeated Draco. “You had that whole big section gone! How is that ‘not so well’?”

“It was an accident,” said Neville resignedly. “I tripped and sparks went everywhere. Some of them had to hit the target.”

“I bet it wasn’t an accident at all,” said Meghan. “I bet you’re just trying to make everyone else feel better because they didn’t do as well as you.”

Neville grinned, looking pleased and embarrassed at the same time.

“Say, where’s Hermione?” asked Ron, putting his sock back on. “Didn’t she come with us?”

“She may have stayed behind,” said Draco. “She didn’t look happy about how she scored on the last round.”

“Do her good not to be the best at everything,” said Harry. “I wonder if we’ll ever find out how we scored?”

“Let me save you the trouble,” said Ron. “You were the best in the class.”

“What? I was not!”

“Yes, you were,” seconded Neville. “Almost all your hits were close to the center, and you had a lot of them. Other people had more hits, or closer to the bull’s eye, but no one had more in the center than you.”

Harry smiled, feeling flattered. “Wow.”

“I’m just no good,” said Hermione, a bit tearfully, in the Defense teachers’ office. “Not with that. Not with being fast and hitting things that move around. Harry can do it, Draco can do it – I can’t.”

“Correction,” said Aletha, sitting down on the couch beside her Pack-daughter. “You can’t do it yet. Or rather, you can’t do it well, yet. Your natural talents are in other areas, and you know it – who’s always top of the class in every book subject? Not Harry, nor Draco. I think you’d find they’d be willing to swap you places, if it were possible.”

“You’ll get better, Hermione,” said Sirius from across the room, where he was recording the scores from the different targets. “All you need is practice. You know that – remember when you were learning to fly?”

Hermione smiled. “I thought I’d never be able to go any faster than I could walk,” she said. “Because I was so afraid of losing control.”

“But now, you may never go out for a Quidditch team, but you can get around by broom just fine,” said Aletha. “Your wandwork will be something like that. You will improve, but it’s going to take lots of time and lots of practice. Don’t go giving up the first day, little love.”

“No, wait until the second day,” quipped Sirius. “Because after that, you won’t feel like giving up anymore, because on Wednesday we’re doing something you’re much better at.”

“Yes, the book tests.” Hermione nodded eagerly. “What book are you taking from? The one by Trimble we used last year, or the Guartec? Or both?”

“Now, now, no trying to get information from your teachers,” said Sirius in a mock-scolding tone. “Go on, the others will have missed you by now. Just study the way you always do and you’ll be fine.”

“Because you always study too much for your own good,” said Aletha, copying Sirius’ tone. “Shoo, now, off with you.”

Hermione giggled and ran out of the office into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Aletha sighed. “She’s more right than she knows when she says she’s afraid of losing control.”

“It seems to be a family trait.” Sirius set aside the target he had just finished and picked up another. “But Danger’s overcome it more – obviously, since she’s had twenty more years to work on it.”

“Hermione will get there.” Aletha gazed out the window. “I think maybe when she falls in love, that control of hers will start cracking. When she finds out she can’t control him, she’ll start coming to terms with the fact that she can’t control a lot of things.”

“Thinking ahead, are we? Have a boy in mind for her already?”

“Don’t you think she’d suit Ron nicely?”

“Ron?” Sirius guffawed. “Ron Weasley?”

“That sounds like a no.”

“Well...” Sirius looked at the wall, thinking hard. “They get along part of the time, but they do fight a lot.”

“So did James and Lily fight a lot. And they didn’t even get along part of the time until sixth year.”

“You have a point. All right, I suppose it might work. But it’s early days to be thinking about that kind of thing.” Sirius returned to his work. “Thank goodness, Meghan won’t be thinking about anything like that for another four or five years.”

Aletha shook her head, smiling fondly.

I do love the man, but there are days I wonder if he has eyes in his head.

On Tuesday, Ginny Weasley was just leaving her own Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, feeling elated and surrounded by a faint haze of smoke, when she thought she heard crying.

She followed the sound and discovered Dudley Dursley in an empty classroom nearby, sobbing.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Dursley jumped a foot. “N-no, I’m fine, just fine, really...”

His face crumpled, and he let out a wail. Ginny hastily came inside the room and shut the door. “What’s wrong?” she asked, as gently as she could.

“My broomstick,” Dursley managed to get out after wiping his face with Ginny’s handkerchief. “It was an old one, used, because my dad cut off my pocket money, he doesn’t like me being at Hogwarts, so I had to use my savings – it was the only one I could afford, and it wasn’t very good, but it was mine, and now they’ve gone and smashed it...”

“Who?”

“Crabbe and Goyle – and I wanted to try out for the Quidditch team, and they knew it...” Dursley sniffled hard. “Ever since I learned about Quidditch, I’ve wanted to play. I saved all year for that broomstick, and it might not even have been good enough, but it was my only chance...”

“Listen,” said Ginny, patting him a trifle awkwardly on the shoulder. “Here’s what you can do. Go to Professor Snape, he’s your Head of House. Tell him what they did. You didn’t do anything to provoke them, did you?”

Dursley shook his head. “It’s all because I gave up running around with them and Nott,” he said. “Nott told them to do it, they do whatever he says.”

“Tell Professor Snape about it,” Ginny urged him. “He ought to make them at least pay you back what you paid for the broomstick. Or it might be able to be fixed or something. But you’ll never get anywhere by crying.”

“All right.” Dursley sniffled once more, then handed Ginny back her handkerchief. “Thanks. I’ll do that.”

Wednesday night was full moon, and the Pride showed Ginny and Luna around the Den. Ginny was awestruck by the indoor Quidditch pitch, while Luna went straight into the library. “This is wrong,” she announced. “The piano needs its own room. The library is a place for quiet. We need a music room.”

A section of bookshelf-lined wall swung slowly open.

“Good.” Luna began to push the piano towards the new opening in the wall. Draco helped her.

The room beyond was not overly large, but the grand piano fit inside with room enough to walk all around it, and Draco suspected, and confirmed by having Luna play while he shut the door from the library, that it was soundproof. There was one panicked moment when he couldn’t figure out how to get the door open again, but he shortly

realized that the book called “Sweet Harmony” functioned as a sort of doorknob, the door opening when the book was pulled out.

“Have you made up with Harry yet?” asked Luna in her blunt way as Draco came back in.

Draco punched the wall moodily. “Not yet.”

“Remember what Mrs. Danger told you. Always apologize first, even if the other person was wrong.”

Draco laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“Well, in the first place, if anyone but you, or Danger, said something like that to me, I’d be mad at them. And in the second place, how’d you even know about that?” Draco held up his hand to stop her. “Never mind, I know – Sophia told you.”

“No, Mrs. Danger told me. Before the year started. She said she was counting on me to smooth over fights, since I don’t get upset easily.”

“Easily? Try at all. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you really upset – except when your mum died.”

Luna’s hand went to her chest. “Is this room really soundproof?” she asked, her voice a little wavery. “Does any sound get out at all?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think any sound gets out. I couldn’t hear a note from the library, and you weren’t playing quietly.”

“All right.” Luna got off the piano bench and crawled under the piano.

Confused, Draco bent down just in time to see her burst into tears.

“Oh no,” he muttered to himself. “I’ve done it now.” He hesitated a moment, then got down on hands and knees and crawled underneath with her. “I’m sorry, Luna, I didn’t mean to...”

"It's all right," she said through her tears. "I just miss her sometimes..."

Slightly hesitantly, Draco put his arm around Luna, and was surprised when she leaned into him. They stayed that way for what felt like a long time, though by Draco's watch it was only about five minutes, while Luna cried herself out.

"I'm better now," she said after a while. "Thank you."

"Any time," said Draco, and to his surprise, meant it.

He crawled out, got up, and went looking for Harry.

The entire rest of the Pride was in the Quidditch room, tossing the Quaffle around. Draco picked up his own broom, which he'd brought down to den-night with him, and took off, intercepting Ron's throw to Ginny.

Quaffle under one arm, he flew over to Harry. "I'm sorry about Monday," he said, tossing the ball to his brother. "I overreacted. You were just trying to help."

"No, I'm sorry. You were right – it's none of my business what you do."

"Shake?"

"Sure."

Harry transferred the Quaffle to his left arm and held out his right hand. Draco shook it, then cross-punched with his left fist, knocking the Quaffle out of Harry's grasp, and dove to catch it. "Let's play!" he called back.

"Cheater!" yelled Harry, but he was smiling.

The rest of the week was more or less normal. Colin Creevey finally cornered Harry and Padfoot together after dinner on Thursday to take their picture, and promised he'd give them a copy as soon as it was developed. Harry corrected the story Colin had heard about Draco,

which cast the Pack as ruthless kidnappers, and promised, with a trace of malice aforethought, that he and Draco would pose for a photograph together soon.

History of Magic was still boring, Transfiguration was still difficult, and the Gryffindor second years still had Potions with the Slytherins. Snape was, if anything, ruder than before to Harry and the other cubs. It seemed no one in his first three classes on Monday had told him about his hair, so that he hadn't discovered it was green until he went into the lavatory and saw himself in the mirror.

Padfoot had pulled Harry aside after their Defense lesson on Wednesday and asked him if Snape had taken any points off in that morning's Potions class. When Harry admitted he had, Padfoot asked for details, and promptly awarded Gryffindor fifteen points, since he said that was the number probably due to his own actions.

"I'll replace anything he takes because of me," he'd told Harry. "If you annoy him yourselves, you're on your own."

The Pride had planned to follow up on Hagrid's invitation to come and see him on Saturday. Harry, though, was rudely awakened, at what he thought groggily must be what Padfoot called an ungodly early hour, by Oliver Wood shaking him hard.

"Huh?"

"Come on, Harry! Quidditch practice!"

Harry pried his eyes open. Wood's face, which he could dimly see, was filled with a sort of maniacal enthusiasm.

Harry groaned as he realized why he couldn't see Wood well. "Go'way, Oliver, it's not even light out yet. Besides, we can't have practice now."

"Why not?"

"We haven't had tryouts." Harry rolled over, intending to go back to sleep.

“Who needs tryouts?” asked Wood, sounding surprised. “We’ve got a full team. Now come on, let’s get cracking.”

Harry sighed. Obviously, Wood wasn’t about to leave him alone. “Do you remember last year?” he said, grudgingly sitting up. “How we had to forfeit a game because we didn’t have a reserve Seeker?”

The expression of pain on Wood’s face made it quite clear that he remembered.

“So it might do good to have a few reserves. Right?”

“Yes, I suppose, right. Why, did you have someone in mind?”

Harry nodded. “Draco and Ron both wanted to try out.”

“Hmm.” Wood seemed to be giving the matter serious thought. “Are they any good?”

“Yes. Draco outflowed me once, in a friendly at home. And Ron’s a decent Keeper – not as good as you, but you’re leaving in two years.”

“And we’re going to have that Quidditch Cup before I do,” said Wood decisively. “All right, get them up, they can try out now. Fifteen minutes, on the pitch.”

When Wood had gone, Harry started waking Draco, since Ron was a heavy sleeper and would need both their efforts to rouse him. Once he understood that this was his chance to get on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Draco got up.

“Early to bed and early to rise...”

“Don’t you start on me too.” Harry made a face in the general direction of his pillow. “Are you coming? I’m going to be flying.”

“Since I am awake already, why not.”

Harry climbed back on his bed, and the green snake slithered up his arm, disappearing under the red Quidditch robes.

They ended up having to remove Ron from his bed physically and pour some water from the pitcher down his back. Draco had the forethought to cover Ron's mouth with a pillow, silencing the inevitable yell. Ron was not happy with them, until Harry explained exactly why he was dragging his best friend out of bed at the crack of dawn. The word "Quidditch" changed Ron's outlook almost exactly as it had Draco's.

"Though if Wood's always like this, I may rethink it after all," said Draco as they went down the stairs in single file, having left a note for Neville, asking him to explain to the girls.

"He was kind of maniacal about it last year, but he never got us up this early," said Harry. "I guess missing the Cup by one game hit him kind of hard."

"It's not like it was your fault or anything," said Ron. "Well, it sort of was, we wouldn't have had to forfeit if you'd been there, but you couldn't help being unconscious... unless we hadn't gone after the Stone..."

"Ron," said Draco. "Shut up."

They detoured slightly into the Great Hall and grabbed a piece of toast each from the platters which were only just appearing on the tables. Ron took two, and ate one on the way down to the Quidditch field, where Harry led them into the changing rooms.

The rest of the team was already there. The Weasley twins were leaning on one another, half-asleep by the look of it. Alicia Spinnet, next to them, was resting her head against the wall behind her, eyes closed. Across the room on the other benches, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell seemed to be having a yawning competition.

"There you are," said Wood cheerily. He was so awake it was almost rude. "Black, Weasley, nice to see you – what positions do you play?"

“Chaser by preference, but I can Seek if you need me to,” said Draco. “That’s if Harry ends up in the hospital wing again.”

Harry elbowed him.

“Keeper,” said Ron. “But I’m not anywhere near as good as you – I get nerves.”

“So did I, once,” said Wood. “You’ll get over it. Have a seat – we’re just going to have a little talk about strategy before we get to the flying...”

Ron perked up at this, looking interestedly at the complicated diagram Wood had drawn of the Quidditch field, and even more so when Wood animated it. Harry was grateful for his friend’s rapt attention – it meant he himself wasn’t expected to make comments or ask questions.

Three boards and nearly an hour later, when Wood finally ran out of things to say, he led them out onto the field, handing Draco a Quaffle. “Let’s see how you handle it,” he said, taking off. “Try and score past me.”

Draco did one or two maneuvers with the Quaffle before even approaching the goal hoops – tossing and catching it, rolling it around in his hands, even balancing it on the back of one arm. It looked like he was showing off, and he was, a little, but he was also getting a feel for the Quaffle, Harry knew. All Quaffles were slightly different.

Without warning, Draco shot for the goal hoops, aiming directly for the left one. Wood moved to block, and Draco veered to the right, making an easy goal. Wood looked chagrined as he retrieved the Quaffle. He blocked Draco’s next two shots, but let the third one slip past.

“Can I try some team moves?” Draco asked as Wood tossed the Quaffle back to him.

“Don’t see why not – Katie, Angelina, let’s have you up here.”

Draco and the two girls passed the ball around a bit among themselves, then ganged up on Wood, tossing it rapidly back and forth so that he was never sure which of them would try to score. They made four of their ten attempts, after which Wood signaled them back to the ground.

“Welcome to the team,” he said without preamble, sticking his hand out to Draco. “If you can score on me that easily, you ought to fly circles around Bletchley.”

Draco shook Wood’s hand, grinning.

“All right, Weasley, let’s see what you can do,” said Wood, waving Ron up to the goal hoops.

Katie, Angelina, and Draco took to the air again, this time with Alicia along, trying to score past Ron, who blocked not quite half of their throws.

“Well, you’re not the best Keeper I’ve ever seen,” said Wood frankly when Ron had landed again. “But you’re far from the worst. And being reserve, you’ll practice with us and have some time to improve – so welcome aboard.”

Ron looked like he couldn’t believe his ears.

“Last one to the other end of the pitch is a rotten dragon egg!” shouted Harry, and sped into the air, grinning. From inside his shirt, Siss gave the loud hiss that was the snake’s equivalent of a happy yell.

It was definitely going to be a good year.

(A/N: Have you noticed a pattern to the end of the chapters recently? Do you recall that this author has a bit of a sarcastic – or perhaps the word is sadistic – streak? Did you know that PDA stands for Public Display of Affection? What would you think if your parents gave you a skunk finger puppet for Easter? Will you please review? Please?)

Chapter 25: Halloween

Ginny was on her way to Potions when she heard someone call her name.

“Ginny! Got a second?”

Dudley Dursley was running across the Great Hall, grinning. “I just wanted to say thank you,” he said. “I did what you suggested – talked to Professor Snape – and it worked! Nott and Crabbe and Goyle all got detentions, and they had to pay for my broomstick to get fixed!”

“That’s wonderful,” said Ginny, smiling at him.

“And that’s not all – I’m on the team! I’m a reserve Beater for Slytherin!”

“Congratulations.” Ginny shook his hand. “Just don’t hit any Bludgers too hard at Ron, all right? He’s nervous enough when he plays.”

“I won’t. Thank you so much. If there’s ever anything I can do for you...”

Ginny nodded. “I’ll remember.”

A few days later, the Pride was sitting outdoors after lunch, reading and chatting. Harry was discussing their Defense lessons with Ginny, comparing the first year curriculum to the second, when she looked across the courtyard and frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

She pointed. Dudley Dursley was on the other side of the courtyard, saying something to Percy, who was looking very prefectish and stern. Harry and Ginny got up and moved closer.

“...supposed to know I was disturbing you? It’s break! We’re allowed to laugh!”

“I don’t like your attitude, Dursley. I’ll have that book.”

“But it’s mine!”

“And you were reading it in a disruptive manner. Hand it over.”

Dursley looked sulky, but produced a small book from within his cloak and gave it to Percy.

“You can have it back by applying through your Head of House,” said Percy, tucking the book away inside his own cloak. “Kindly conduct yourself in a more appropriate fashion in the future.”

He turned and walked away.

Dursley looked at Harry and Ginny. “I was laughing too loud at what I was reading,” he said, shrugging. “I thought the whole point of break was to let it out, do what you’re not supposed to do in class, like make loud noises and laugh.”

“It is,” Harry said, watching Percy go. “He’s just being a prat – sorry, Ginny.”

“Don’t apologize, it’s true.” Ginny turned to Dursley. “Sorry about him. He’s always been a bit like this.”

“And you have to live in the same house with him? You have my sympathies.”

“Thanks.” Ginny smiled. “How’s Quidditch coming?”

“All right. It’s a lot harder than I thought to hit the Bludger hard enough without falling off my broom...”

They discussed the fine points of playing the various positions until the bell rang for afternoon classes.

“You know, he’s really not so bad,” said Harry as they made their way indoors.

Wood got into a bit of a spat with Slytherin Quidditch Captain Marcus Flint over practice times near the end of September, but Madam Pomfrey and Meghan were able to remove the tentacles, and the four

Heads of House worked out a schedule for their respective teams to use the pitch. No one was entirely happy with it, which meant it was a perfect compromise.

Meghan, on the other hand, was happier than anyone had ever seen her. What had begun as a way to keep her out of everyone's hair was fast becoming an indispensable part of her life. Madam Pomfrey was heard to say, as October arrived and students began coming down with colds, that she didn't know how she'd coped without the girl.

Overall, life was good for Pack and Pride. Letters from Remus and Danger arrived often, narrating tales of life at home without everyone, and the Hogwarts contingent made sure to keep them updated on all the funny little things that happened.

Such as the incident of the 14th of October.

Sirius was just coming out of his office when he heard giggling down the hall.

I know that laugh.

As he watched, all eight of the Pride scuttled past the intersection of the halls he could see. Only Harry, bringing up the rear, thought to look both ways, and his face turned an odd shade of green as he caught sight of Sirius.

Sirius walked quickly over to him. "Do I want to know?" he asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Then I never saw you." Sirius turned around and listened to Harry's footsteps retreating down the hall, climbing another set of stairs, finally echoing into nothingness.

I wonder what they pulled this time.

He descended the marble staircase into the entrance hall, intending to visit the kitchens and grab something to eat. Dinner wasn't for another two hours, after all.

“Black!”

He turned. “Snape,” he said as politely as he could manage.

The Potions Master’s greasy face was twisted with rage. “Where are your children?”

“I have no idea. Why?”

“Do you know what they have done?”

“Do you mean recently, or in general?”

Snape fumed for a moment, then regained control of himself. “I demand to know where they are.”

“And I’ve already told you, I don’t know.”

“A degradation of the most infamous kind... they will not get away with this, not even you will shelter them from it...” Snape was pacing around a small section of the hall, fists clenched.

“What did you catch them doing?”

“I caught them doing nothing. I returned to my office to find it already accomplished.”

“Then how do you know it was them?”

“Because,” said Snape in a poisonous tone, “no one else in this castle would have the audacity to fill my best cauldron with liquefied slugs!”

Upstairs, there was extreme merriment.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” said the permanent occupant of the Pride’s hiding place in injured tones.

“Sorry, Myrtle,” said Ron, wiping his eyes. “But you never had Snape in class. You don’t know how possessive he is about his cauldrons.”

“Treats them like precious jewels,” said Draco, leaning against one of the walls and catching his breath.

“And that potion you made was brilliant, Hermione,” said Harry. “Looks just like slugs put through a blender.”

“Thanks.” Hermione blushed a little.

“We ought to catch a Gragblatter in the forest and let it go in his office,” said Luna. “They like to drink potions. It would probably drink up all the ones he keeps in there before he got back.”

Neville shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “Not for a while. We’d better lay off until he cools down about this.”

“But it was brilliant, wasn’t it?” said Meghan, going into a fresh wave of giggles. “When he screamed like that?”

“We were lucky he didn’t catch us,” said Hermione. “We just barely got out of there in time – good thinking to watch the door, Neville, he would have caught us for sure if you hadn’t warned us.”

Neville smiled. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“We’d better wash the cauldron out,” said Ginny, drawing her wand. “So they don’t have any evidence against us. Scourgify!”

Pink soap bubbles appeared within the encrusted cauldron Hermione had used to brew the potion they’d left for Snape, but it did not become magically clean. Ginny frowned. “I need some help,” she said.

Luna drew her own wand. “Scourgificus Maximus,” she said.

The mess within the cauldron rocketed out and plastered itself all over the walls, leaving the cauldron sparkling clean but the rest of the bathroom, and its occupants, covered in potion remnants.

“Oops,” said Luna unconcernedly, looking around.

Moaning Myrtle, floating above her usual stall, giggled.

Hermione and Ginny, working together, managed to get most of the mess cleared up, and the Pride slipped out of the bathroom by twos and threes, so as not to be seen. Harry, Ron, and Hermione went last, and Ron was just shutting the door when a voice made all three of them jump nearly a foot.

“RON!”

“Oh, hell,” said Ron under his breath.

“What in the name of Merlin were you doing in a girls’ bathroom?” demanded Percy, staring at them from the top of the nearby staircase.

“Er, well, I really had to go,” said Ron weakly. “And I didn’t see any boys’ ones around.”

Harry nodded hard. Hermione seemed to be fighting off an attack of nervous giggles.

Percy scowled at them. “Five points from Gryffindor,” he said, “and don’t let me catch you here again.” The light glinted on his glasses and prefect badge as he marched away.

Ron’s ears were red. “That’s right,” he muttered as they walked down the hall, “we’ll just see how shiny that badge is when I stick it up your—”

“Ron!”

Snape was unable to pin the incident on anyone, and thus punished all of Gryffindor House by taking massive amounts of points during their Potions lessons, but no one really minded. The first Quidditch match, in November, would more than make up for it, and a hundred points or so was a small price to pay for the thought of Snape’s face when he saw what was in his best cauldron.

It rained so much in the latter half of October that Professor Sprout shifted the focus of their Herbology lessons to aquatic plants. For one of these lessons, Harry was paired with a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy, who introduced himself as Justin Finch-Fletchley. “I’ve seen your

friend Neville down here a lot,” he said as they carefully clipped off the seed pods on the sea grass they were tending. “He likes this subject, doesn’t he?”

Harry nodded. “He visited my house a few weeks this summer, and he was always out in the back garden with Meghan.”

“Meghan? Oh, that’s right, the Professors’ daughter.” Justin frowned. “Is it true she sleeps in your dormitory? The girls’ side, I mean, of course?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

Justin shook his head. “I don’t think that’s right. She’s not really a student. She should live in her parents’ rooms, or somewhere else altogether. I remember when I was younger, my mum wanted me to go to Harrow, but my dad said the headmaster had a son my age and would always favor him, so he put my name down for Eton instead...”

Harry gave a small nod and checked his watch, relieved to see that there were only a few minutes left in the class.

“So she’s not a student,” he said to his Pride as they walked up to the castle, taking advantage of a momentary break in the rain. “So what? What does it hurt to have her here? It’s not like she’s freeloading, she works hard in the hospital wing...”

“She’s always tired when she gets in,” contributed Hermione. “And besides, if we didn’t have the Pack, where else could she go? Both her parents are here.”

“And they’ve had people in the dorms before who aren’t in the Houses,” said Ron. “Guests and such. I know usually they get suites, but if there’s a lot of them, they might get some overflow in the dorms.”

Draco nodded. “Dorms aren’t sacred or anything. Besides, Pearl’ll be a Gryffindor in just a couple of years anyway.”

“And it’s about to rain again,” said Neville, looking up. “Come on, let’s run.”

They sprinted for the castle as the skies opened up.

It was generally hard to improve on perfection, but the Halloween feast this year managed. The dancing skeletons Dumbledore had engaged for entertainment were amazing, not only rattling their bones in perfect time with the music but juggling their skulls, tossing them from one to another so fast you could only see a white blur.

“How do they figure out whose is whose afterward?” asked Ron as the skeletons took their bow.

“Don’t know,” said Harry as the main courses vanished and puddings appeared. “Pass the treacle tart, Ginny?”

Ginny handed it down the table, shooing away a bat which was swooping towards it, then lifted her goblet. “To a happy Halloween,” she said.

“A happy Halloween,” echoed the rest of the Pride, lifting their own goblets in answer.

“And no trolls,” added Hermione, making everyone laugh.

Harry took a bite of his tart, then paused. “Siss?” he said doubtfully.

“Sorry?” said Draco.

“Nothing.” Harry swallowed and listened hard. He’d been almost sure he’d heard his friend’s voice...

And then he heard it again.

“... prey... must find prey...”

Harry was on his feet, moving toward the exit of the Great Hall. How did she get that hungry without me noticing? I have to find her, get her something to eat before she goes and bites someone and gets us both in trouble...

"Where are you going?" asked Hermione's voice from a little behind him, sounding breathless as she jogged to keep up with him.

"I have to find Siss. Something's wrong with her."

"So hungry... for so long..."

Harry shook his head, still moving. I could have sworn I got her a mouse last week. Maybe she's been more active recently...

He was on the first floor now, at the top of the marble staircase, but he still wasn't level with the voice, which kept moving up.

She's in a hurry. Must think I'm in my dorm. I'd call to her, but someone might hear me... no, what am I thinking of? Everyone's at the feast, no one's going to know...

"Siss! Wait for me!"

"That's scary, Harry," said Neville from behind him.

"That rhymed," said Meghan.

"Shh," said Harry to both of them, straining his ears.

"Food..." said the voice in tones of satisfaction. "Food at last..."

"Siss, whatever you're thinking of eating, don't!" Harry yelled, taking the stairs two at a time. With my luck, she's found a mouse someone transfigured from a toy one and it's going to change back in her stomach and hurt her...

"Harryyyyyy!"

The scream put new wings on his feet as he hurtled down the hallways of the second floor. He stopped suddenly as he turned the last corner. A torch high on the wall sputtered, but gave enough light for him to see what was lying on the floor.

Siss, on her side, unmoving and limp.

He was on his knees beside her, picking her up. "Siss, wake up. I'm here."

The snake did not respond.

"Siss, say something. Please. You're scaring me... if this is a joke, it isn't funny..."

Nothing. The body in his hands remained as lifeless as if it were made of rubber. The eyes, always so lively, were glazed over, unfocused. Not even a tremor of breath moved her.

"No." Harry shook his head, cradling Siss against him like a baby. "No. Siss, you have to wake up. You have to. Please, wake up. Please..."

He was blinking away tears, and wondered when he'd started crying.

"Please don't be dead..."

All she needed was to get warm. He'd hold her against his body to warm her up. Against his chest would be the best place – she could have his body heat, and the heat from his pendants as well...

Aletha hadn't been too worried when the entire Pride suddenly got up and left the Great Hall, Harry in the lead. They had probably just remembered that they had to get a prank ready for someone.

She smiled. Liquefied slugs, indeed...

A few moments later, her pendants heated up.

Now I think I need to worry.

"Harry," said Sirius, having pulled his chain from his robes before she could and identified the person whose distress was being signaled. "Come on, we'd better find him."

They pushed back their chairs and rose. Dumbledore looked down the table at them, and Sirius tapped his chest significantly. The Headmaster nodded and sat back.

“What could be upsetting Harry this much?” Aletha asked quietly as they left the Great Hall.

“Don’t know. He might have taken a bad fall and gotten hurt somehow... in which case, someone will be coming to get us any minute...”

Footsteps pounded along the gallery which led to the marble staircase from the first floor.

“Right on schedule,” said Aletha, looking up.

Percy Weasley dashed into sight, looking somewhat frazzled and very relieved to see them. “Professors, thank heaven – can you come right away? It’s Harry, he’s on the second floor, and there’s writing on the wall, it says the most incredible thing...”

“What’s happened to Harry?” asked Aletha, running up the stairs and following Percy down the hall.

“It’s his snake, Professor. I think it’s dead.”

“Oh, no,” Aletha breathed. Siss was so much more than a pet to Harry – she was a friend, perhaps even a mother figure...

“Oh, yes,” said Sirius darkly, pointing up ahead.

Someone was crying, and the pain in his voice quickened Aletha’s feet even more on the second staircase. The unthinkable had happened to this person, the world had fallen in on him...

Harry was on his knees, folded over on himself, alternating broken sobs with full-out howls of grief. Hermione and Meghan knelt one on either side of him, trying to comfort him with their mere presence. The rest of his friends were hovering around, obviously unsure of what to

do. Draco looked up with great relief as Aletha and Sirius came into sight.

"Is it Siss?" Aletha asked him.

Draco nodded. "I don't know what he's saying, though," he said. "It's all in Parseltongue."

Harry's sobs had indeed now given way to a torrent of hissing speech, and although Aletha couldn't understand the words, she'd heard that tone in enough voices to know what was being said.

You can't be dead. I love you. I need you. You can't be dead...

She knelt down in front of Harry and laid a hand on his shoulder, getting no response from him at all.

"I don't think he even knows we're here," said Meghan. She glanced at the limp snake in Harry's hands and sniffled slightly. "Why did she die?"

"I don't know, little love. But we will find out." Aletha's eyes traveled from her daughter's face to the wall behind her, and suddenly she recalled what Percy had said in the entrance hall.

"...writing on the wall... it says the most incredible thing..."

It certainly does.

She stood up and backed away a few paces, so that she could read the entire message. Sirius obviously already had; his face was grimly set.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Aletha sighed. Why can't we just have a normal life?

"Do you want to deal with Harry, or with this?" she asked Sirius, waving at the wall.

"I'll take Harry. Back to our quarters, I think. He ought to be alone for a little while. Well, not alone exactly, but not with a lot of people who didn't know about him and Siss."

"We'll come," said Ron. "If we're allowed."

Sirius nodded. "Certainly." He drew his wand and touched it gently to the top of Harry's head. "Consopio," he said.

Harry slumped where he was, his sobs stopping abruptly. Sirius caught him, and Ron and Draco hurried over to help Sirius get Harry into his arms. Draco helped Hermione up afterwards, and Meghan got up and went over to Neville, who patted her shoulder awkwardly, then almost timidly put an arm around her when she leaned into him. The Pride followed Sirius as he carried Harry towards the stairs, which would take him to their office and quarters.

A distant rumble alerted Aletha that the feast must be over, and there would be people in the hallway in a few moments. She looked at Percy, who had been watching everything silently. "I'll need your help to keep them under control," she said. "The last thing we need is panic."

"Yes, ma'am."

Prefect and professor turned to face the incoming crowds. Harry began to stir before they reached the office, which suited Sirius fine. He'd used only the lightest possible Sleeping Spell, just enough to keep Harry quiescent until he could get his godson to somewhere private. Harry needed to grieve. Putting it off would only make it worse.

Odd to think of it with James and Lily, but this is the first time that someone he's actually known has ever died...

And that was a good question Meghan asked. How did she die? There's no marks on her that I can see, and what would have attacked her in the school anyway?

And it can't be a coincidence that she was lying under that message. I don't like this.

"Siss," Harry mumbled, as Draco opened the door of the office for Sirius. "Siss, wake up."

Sirius sighed, lowering Harry to the couch and drawing his wand. "Come on in," he told the rest of the Pride. "And shut the door behind you." He opened the door to his and Aletha's quarters and started conjuring cushions on the floor of the living area, adding a few sheets to one side for good measure.

"Do you want us to den with him?" asked Draco, coming up beside Sirius.

"Yes. Don't push him to do anything he doesn't want to, just get comfortable and stay with him. Don't let him leave, and don't any of you leave either. Bathroom's down the hall to the right if any of you need it." Sirius put his wand away.

Draco nodded and went over to Ginny and Luna, speaking to them in a low tone.

Sirius approached Harry, who was sitting up now, rubbing his eyes and looking confused. "How'd I get here?" he asked as Sirius sat down beside him on the couch.

"I brought you. You're going to den in here tonight, I think."

"All right." Harry looked down at what he was holding, and Sirius saw his shoulders stiffen. "Siss..." He held the snake against him, his eyes filling with tears again. "Padfoot, she's dead!"

Sirius nodded slowly, wishing he didn't have to, that he could tell Harry it was all a mistake and erase the pain and grief in his godson's eyes. But he knew he couldn't.

All we can do is try to help him get through it.

Harry let out another sob, but he seemed to have worn himself out in the hallway. He was still crying, certainly, but it was quieter and calmer, if any kind of crying could be described as calm. The rest of the Pride was in the living area now, setting up the den, Sirius saw, leaving him and Harry alone for a few moments.

He had seldom felt so helpless. It wasn't a feeling he liked.

But at least I'm here. That has to count for something.

Harry was just wiping his eyes with Sirius' handkerchief when someone knocked at the outer door of the office.

"Who is it?" Sirius said quietly, knowing the charms on the door would carry his voice out.

"It is I," answered Dumbledore's voice.

"Just a moment." Sirius looked down at Harry. "I need to ask you something hard, Greeneyes," he said.

"What?"

"I need to see Siss. We need to examine her, to try to find out how she died. We won't..." Sirius stopped before saying, hurt her. "We'll be careful," he finished instead.

Slowly, Harry opened his left hand, exposing the limp body of the snake. "She never hurt anyone," he said stiffly. "She never did anything wrong."

"I know." Sirius knew there were a million other things he could say, but his instincts were warning him to keep his mouth shut. "I know."

Harry's throat worked once as he stared at his dead friend. Then he tilted his hand, letting her body slide onto Sirius' palm. Without speaking, he got up and walked into the other room, and Meghan shut the door behind him.

Sirius laid the snake gently on his desk, then went to open the door.

As he had expected, Dumbledore wasn't alone. Aletha was with him, of course, but so was Minerva McGonagall, Severus Snape, and Remus and Danger, Danger still brushing ashes out of her hair. Of course, their pendants would have activated as well...

"Where are they?" asked Minerva, looking around the office.

"Back in there," Sirius said, nodding towards the back of the room as everyone filed in. "Do you think someone should stay with them?"

"I can go," said Danger. "I'm unlikely to be much help out here." She crossed the office and slipped quietly through the door. "Shoes off, everyone," Sirius heard her say before the door was closed again.

"Will he be all right?" asked Dumbledore quietly.

"I think so," said Sirius. "It was just a shock – first person he's ever known who's died..."

Dumbledore nodded. "And to him, she would indeed be a person, due to his gift."

"Gift?" asked Snape sharply.

Damn it, that's right, he doesn't know...

"Harry's a Parselmouth," said Aletha. "We don't know why, or how. We assume it has something to do with Voldemort, but there's no real way to tell. And it's beside the point in any case."

Sirius and Remus exchanged a small smile. Hearing Aletha shut someone down was always a treat. For that someone to be Snape, instead of one of them, was very enjoyable indeed.

But as she'd said, that was beside the point today. The point was, who, or what, had killed Harry's pet snake?

And how could they make sure it didn't happen again?

Harry felt numb, as if all his ability to feel had flowed out of him with his tears. His head was resting in Danger's lap, and her arm was across him, holding one of his hands, but it didn't make him feel any better. Ron and Draco were playing a game of chess, while Hermione was reading aloud to everyone else. Glances kept flicking towards him, but where this would normally have annoyed Harry to the point of shouting, tonight he didn't care.

Something thin and gold intruded on his vision. He rolled onto his back and looked up. Danger had lengthened her pendant chain and was holding it out to him in an obvious invitation.

Harry didn't really want to talk, but it was easier to take the chain than to say no. He accepted it and slid it over his head, deciding that he would ignore anything that Danger had to say. It wouldn't change anything, anyway.

But the first thing that came across the link between them wasn't spoken. It was an emotion, or a mix of emotions. Love was there, the strong, fierce love of a mother for her cub, but there was also grief and sorrow and pain and confusion and anger. Everything Harry had felt since he had realized Siss was dead, Danger had felt as well.

When? he asked, spurred into curiosity despite himself.

When my parents died.

Feeling flooded back into Harry, a feeling of shame. Here he was, making a huge fuss over a pet snake, when Danger had lost both her parents in one day...

Oh, damn, that was not what I meant, said Danger, her shoulders sagging. I'm not trying to downplay your loss, Greeneyes. Siss meant a lot to you. What I'm trying to say is that I know what it feels like to lose someone without any warning, someone you've always counted on to be there. Because they always were. Until one day suddenly they're not.

Harry looked up at her through a haze of tears. You do understand, then.

Yes, I do. And I know that doesn't make it one bit easier to take. Nothing will, for a little while. But you don't have to do this alone. She bent and brushed her lips against his cheek. Remember that. You're not alone.

Harry turned over, pulled his glasses off, buried his face in her shirt, and began once more to cry. You're wrong, he said through the link. It does make it easier. A little bit.

Then I'm glad. For your sake.

Danger's arms were anchoring him, keeping him from floating away on the ocean of tears he was crying. They were the only real things in the world besides his grief. He was thankful they were there.

Later, when he had cried himself out for the moment, he was thankful for other things being there. Like the rest of the Pride. Ron's winning strategy against Draco, and the story Hermione was reading, gave him something to think about rather than how Siss had looked as she lay on the cold stone floor. He even managed to drink a little of the hot chocolate the house-elves brought them before they changed into their pajamas (brought down from their dormitories) and found places to curl up in the den they'd built.

Meghan cuddled up against him and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you," she whispered.

Harry scent-touched her, then let his eyes close, surrendering to the tiredness.

His last coherent thought was to hope he didn't dream.

"You put the potion in his chocolate, didn't you?" asked Remus.

Aletha nodded. "Dreamless Sleep. He needs it."

Sirius sighed. "I might steal a bit of that for myself." They'd examined Siss' body scrupulously, and all they could determine was that she was dead. There were no marks on her, no signs that she'd eaten

anything that poisoned her – it was almost as if she'd died by the Killing Curse, but who would bother to use Avada Kedavra on a common garden snake?

"Is it possible she died of natural causes?" asked Danger. They were alone in the office, the other teachers having excused themselves when it had become clear that they would learn little, if anything, from examining Siss. The snake's body now reposed on Sirius' desk, in a small wooden box Dumbledore had conjured for it. "Harry never said anything to me about how old she was, but he knew her in London – they met when he was four. So that makes her at least eight or nine. I don't know how old that is for a snake..."

"But what would bring Harry running out of the Hall to exactly where she was? And what about that writing on the wall?" Remus shook his head. "There's something going on here we don't understand. And I'm not about to wake him up and ask him, so it has to wait until morning or later. Would you happen to have a guest bedroom around here somewhere? The closer we stay at the moment, the better, I think."

"Across from ours," said Aletha. "I'll show you."

"Show me," said Danger, standing up. "We can let the boys talk."

"Boys indeed." Remus pinched her gently, making her squeak a little. "There are boys back in there, my dear. I am a man."

"That's what you say." Danger slipped quickly through the door, followed by Aletha, who shut it quietly to avoid disturbing the sleeping children.

"Sassy woman you married, Moony."

"Don't I know it." Remus leaned back in his chair. "It's funny how none of them made a fuss about denning. I would have expected Ron or Neville to be a little more reserved about it. It's not the sort of thing most people do."

Sirius snorted. "Please. And swearing blood oaths in the dead of night, then getting dragged off in dreams to become Heirs of the Houses of Hogwarts is?"

"Point taken. But I'm still struck by how very efficiently they set up den. As if they've done it before."

"You think they have?"

"I think it's a possibility."

"But where? There isn't anywhere in Gryffindor Tower they could do it. Think about it, Moony. They'd need a private place, one they could all get to, but not one other people could easily find. Where is there in the Tower that fits that description?"

"Once again, point taken. Maybe I'm just seeing things that aren't there."

"Mr. Padfoot would like to submit that Mr. Moony often sees things which aren't there."

"Mr. Moony would like to remind Mr. Padfoot of the night he insisted there were blue bowtruckles dancing on the banisters."

"Mr. Padfoot would rather not be reminded of that."

"Mr. Moony knows that, and asks why Mr. Padfoot thinks he did it."
Harry woke up the next morning fully cognizant of what had happened the night before and where he was. Meghan was still breathing softly beside him as he sat up carefully and looked around for his glasses. Finally he spotted them, across the room on an end table.

Siss is dead.

He stepped carefully between his sleeping friends and picked up his glasses, putting them on.

Siss is dead. She died last night.

The room came into clearer focus. His Pride was sprawled every which way on the floor. Harry smiled a little to see Draco and Luna, asleep next to each other, their hands just touching.

Siss is dead. I'll never see her again.

He sat down on the couch and tried to make sense of the feelings warring inside him. He felt horribly sad, of course, but that wasn't the only thing in his heart. He was also happy to see all his friends here, grateful that they had stayed with him, worried because he hadn't had a chance to finish his homework, even hungry for his breakfast. Was he bad because he didn't care enough about Siss for her to be the only thing on his mind?

A sound made him look up. Letha was standing in the entrance to the hall that led to the bedrooms and bathroom, watching him. "Good morning," she said very quietly.

"Good morning." Harry tried to smile, but it was hard.

"Come sit with me?" Letha indicated the office door.

Harry nodded and made his way across the room and out into the office, where he sat down on the couch and pulled his feet up under him. Letha sat next to him, sliding an arm around his shoulders, and he leaned on her, his nose filling with the scent that always seemed to hover around her, clean laundry and a sharp, fresh, herbal smell, rosemary, he thought. He could ask Neville sometime.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't know."

"Complicated?"

"Yes."

"I'm willing to listen, if you're willing to talk."

Harry began, haltingly, to explain how he felt, how he was still terribly sad about Siss, but how it wasn't the only thing he was feeling, and how he felt bad about that, and wondered if he was a bad person for it...

"No," said Letha decisively, cutting him off. "I'll tell you that right now. You are not a bad person. There is no set standard for grief, Harry. No one is going to say, 'No, you haven't cried enough', or 'You don't feel sufficiently bad', or at least no one should. No one has that right. You will do your grieving in your own way and your own time, as we all must. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded. "I think so." He looked up at her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Letha kissed his forehead, and held him as he cried his first tears of the day.

It was a quiet Sunday. Pack and Pride mostly stayed where they were, going out for a few minutes at a time to get things they needed, then returning to the Defense teachers' office. They never left Harry completely alone, but nobody pushed him to do more than he wanted to. If he joined in a game, he was welcomed; if not, they let him be.

He did his share of crying, but quietly, and more or less privately, as no one tried to intrude on him. If he wanted comfort, all he had to do was ask, aloud or with his eyes, and one of the girls, or his Pack-parents, would hold him, or one of the other boys sit next to him, silent reminders that although one person he'd loved was gone, he hadn't been abandoned.

After dinner that night, Pack and Pride gathered outdoors, near the edge of the Forest, where a small hole was waiting. Harry knelt down and laid Siss' coffin in it, with hands that only shook a little bit.

"She was my friend," he said, still kneeling. "She told me things I needed to hear. And I'll never forget her."

He crumbled one piece of dirt over the coffin, then began to scoop the rest of it on in handfuls. The girls were crying, he could hear them, and he'd seen a glint in Ron's blue eyes before he'd knelt down. The

familiar pressure was building in his own throat as well, but he had to finish this before he could cry...

Suddenly he wasn't alone. Draco was kneeling beside him, helping him bury Siss, and Neville on his other side, with something in his hands. A flower, Harry saw, it was a flower in a pot, and he was placing it in the small circular hole Harry had noticed above the grave and wondered at, and as he looked up he realized the only reason Ron wasn't helping him as well was because he was holding Ginny, and Moony was holding Hermione, and Padfoot Meghan, and Danger and Letha were holding each other, all of them crying...

Luna had something in her hands, something that glinted silver. Harry wiped his eyes on his sleeve and saw that it was Draco's flute, and his throat squeezed even a little more as his brother put one final handful of dirt on the grave, then stood up, leaving Harry to finish it himself, and brushed off his hands before taking his instrument from Luna. Neville stood up too, having finished with the flower, and Harry was the only one left kneeling as Draco began to play.

The piece was a lament, a sorrowing over one who was gone, but there was beauty in this sorrow, and peace to be found at the end of it, and a promise that life would go on. Nothing would ever be the same, but grief would not always be the first thing in the morning and the last at night. In time, it would be the happiness and laughter which would be remembered, instead of the sadness and pain.

Harry stayed where he was for what felt like a long time after the last note died away. Then he got up and went back to the castle with his family and friends.

He needed to get to bed. He had class in the morning.

(A/N: Yes, a little bit of angst appears to be bleeding over into the main story, doesn't it? But it's not pointless angst, at least I hope not. And yes, LwoD is back! A week later than I said it would be, but it's back!

Things that we learned in HBP will be making appearances here, but slowly and generally at first, so I don't think they're really going to count as spoilers, because by the time they would get to that point,

everyone's going to have finished the book already. So I don't think that's going to be a problem for me.

And no, I will not be taking a break after Chapter 27. Because the huge cliffhanger has just been moved to the end of Chapter 26. (But I won't be taking a long break after that either. Just a day or so, like usual. Long enough to let you all scream.) Hope you enjoyed, and as always, please review! And responses will start going up on Yahoo group at some point!)

Chapter 26: Plumpton Pass

As they entered the castle, Padfoot stopped Harry before he could start up the stairs. "Detour," he said, pointing to a hallway which led to the ground floor classrooms. "Come on, everyone, we need to get a few things straightened out."

"What'd we do now?" muttered Draco.

"Nothing," said Letha. "But this is to prevent you from doing something."

Harry glanced back in time to see Draco's fingers move. How does she do that? He smiled a little. He'd often wondered the same thing. Were all mothers, even Pack-mothers, gifted with uncommonly sharp ears?

A few waves of the adults' wands pushed desks and chairs aside and conjured sofas and armchairs in a rough circle. Moony and Danger took one of the sofas, Padfoot and Letha another, and Meghan perched on the third and looked at Harry appealingly, patting the place beside her.

Another smile found its way to his face. She looked so much like Padfoot in his dog form when she did that, all large eyes and hopeful pleading. He sat beside her as the rest of the Pride found seats.

"Harry, we need to ask you another hard question," said Letha. "What do you remember of last night?"

"As much as you can remember would be helpful," added Moony. "Start at the beginning. Why did you leave the feast?"

Harry's throat tightened, but he knew the Pack-parents were right. He had to talk about it eventually. Although he didn't understand why it had to be now, he trusted them. "I heard Siss talking," he said. "She was saying she was hungry. She seemed to be moving very fast. I was worried that she might bite someone, or eat something that wouldn't be good for her, so I went to find her and get her something to eat."

"You say she was moving?" asked Danger. "How could you tell?"

"Her voice was moving. First it was right level with me, then it started going up. She must have been on a staircase, just where I couldn't see her. Or inside the wall, in a secret passage."

"That makes sense," said Padfoot. "Go on."

"I followed her voice up the stairs. Two flights. She said she'd found food, and I yelled for her not to eat it—"

"You yelled?" asked Letha. "Do you mean in Parseltongue?"

Harry nodded. "Is that bad? I thought no one would be around to hear me, everyone would be at the feast..."

"You did it more than once," said Neville unexpectedly. "I remember saying something to you the first time."

"You're right," said Harry, recalling this himself. "I told her to wait for me once. Then I heard her say that about food, and shouted for her not to eat. And then she screamed my name..."

Meghan's arms were around him, anchoring him to the present, he would not lose himself in tears again, not even for the memory of Siss' voice echoing down the halls, sounding so frightened, she who had never been afraid of anything, who should have been a Gryffindor herself...

"Do you remember anything about the place where you found her?" asked Danger gently.

Harry shook his head, not trusting his voice.

"There was writing on the wall where you found Siss, Harry," said Moony. "It looked as if someone had intended her to be found in conjunction with their message. To make it clear that they're serious, I suppose."

“Writing on the wall?” Harry frowned. There had been something unusual on the wall under the torch, he thought, but he couldn’t recall it clearly. “What did it say?”

“The Chamber of Secrets has been opened,” recited Padfoot. “Enemies of the Heir, beware.”

“Heir of who?” asked Harry, thinking of his pendants. “Or what? And what’s the Chamber of Secrets?”

“This is why we got you all together,” said Letha. “So you can hear the straight story from us. There will be a thousand wild ideas flying around this school. For once, you are perfectly free to set the record straight. Tell as many people as you want to about this. Understand?”

The girls perked up at the thought that they would be allowed to tell something. Even the other boys looked interested. Harry nodded again. “We’re listening,” he said for the Pride.

“The Chamber of Secrets is a legend that dates from the days of the Founders,” said Moony. “You all know how Hogwarts was founded, and by whom, and about the disagreement over purity of blood. Some stories say that Salazar Slytherin knew the break would come, so before he left the school, he built a secret chamber within it, ever so originally named the Chamber of Secrets.”

Everyone snickered a little at this.

“The Chamber is said to be accessible only to Slytherin’s true heir,” said Danger, picking up the story. “And inside it Slytherin sealed something which would, in his opinion, cleanse the school, removing the undesirable element.”

“He put something in there to kill all the Muggleborns?” blurted Hermione in shock.

“That is the general idea,” said Padfoot. “No one knows what exactly is supposed to be inside the Chamber, but most stories say it’s some sort of monster.”

Draco snorted. "And it can smell blood purity or something? Please."

"It would have to be directed," said Ginny. "Told who to kill and who to leave alone."

"You can't direct a monster," said Ron, just a trifle scornfully. "They don't listen to anyone – well, sometimes they do," he corrected himself. "Depends on what kind they are. Hagrid's got some amazing stories."

"Some monsters respond to things you do, or to a special talisman," said Luna. "The Praxotuil of the Himalayas won't attack you if you sing for it. And Henileges are repelled by things in the shape of the letter B. Maybe Slytherin passed down the secret, or the talisman, in his family, so that only his Heir would have it and be able to control the monster."

"But after a thousand years, would a talisman still be intact?" Draco looked skeptical. "It's got to be something else. Something he taught his sons, and they taught their sons..."

The same idea seemed to occur to the entire Pride at the same time. Harry could see it mirrored in the excited eyes around him. He got up. "Thank you for telling us," he said to his Pack-parents. "Please may we go now?"

"In a hurry to get started telling everyone?" Letha smiled. "Go on, and don't let Filch catch you out of bed too late."

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry, and started for the door.

They had a way to find out if Slytherin had taught his sons anything. Alex was lounging in his chair, holding something Harry would not have expected. "Is that a bubble wand?" he asked.

Alex jumped and hastily stowed the bright green plastic stick behind him. "No. What are you doing here? It's not full moon for another week or so, is it?"

“We need to ask you something,” said Harry as Neville shut the door of the green bedroom behind himself. “About the Chamber of Secrets.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “I had a feeling this was going to come up. It’s all anyone’s been talking about today. ‘The Chamber of Secrets has been opened,’ has it?”

“Do you know anything about it?” asked Draco. “Anything that might help us figure out where it is, or who’s opening it?”

“You know I can’t tell you who,” said Alex. “We covered that this summer. You have to figure out the blood Heirs on your own. As for where, I’d tell you if I knew, but I’m afraid I don’t. I wasn’t in my father’s confidence much in the time span he would have done something like that. I’m positive Matthias knew, though. Probably knew how to open it, too, and been passing the secret down through the family ever since.”

“So it’s a secret?” asked Harry. “Not a physical key or anything?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Alex in slight exasperation. “I’m telling you, I do not know. It might be a real key, or some other object that acts as one, or a spell or charm – it could even be a potion of some sort, our family’s always been noted for potion-making skills. Look to see if there are unusual stains or smells on anyone’s robes.”

Everyone laughed a little.

“Sorry I can’t be more help,” said Alex. “Good luck with it.”

“Thanks anyway,” said Harry, turning to leave.

“Harry, hold on a second?” Alex requested in Parseltongue.

Harry turned back as the rest of the Pride left the green bedroom. “What’s up?”

“I was sorry to hear about Siss,” said Alex, switching back to English. “I’ll miss her.”

Harry nodded, feeling the familiar tightening in his throat. "Me too."

"You know I'm very circumscribed about what I can tell you. But I will say this. There is no way that the Heir of Slytherin should be at Hogwarts right now, and the fact that the Chamber's being opened makes me very uneasy. Be careful of yourself, Harry. And use what you have wisely. Especially things that no one else has."

"I will."

"Oh, and you were right." Alex winked, producing the bubble wand from behind him. "I just didn't want to say it in front of everyone."

"Isn't there a wet spot on your bum now?" asked Harry curiously.

Alex got up, looked over his shoulder, and winced. "Yes. Thank you." He drew his wand and started drying it, then realized Harry was still watching him, stopped, and walked with dignity out of his frame. "Go to bed," came his sibilant voice from off the left side. "It's late, and you have class tomorrow."

"All right."

Harry slipped out of the bedroom, recalling with a pang Siss telling him about a snake-sized entrance hole in this room. Perhaps someone else to use this place had had serpentine friends...

Harry froze as the answer hit him. It had been staring him in the face the entire time, he couldn't believe he'd been so stupid as not to see it...

He was jumping on the red bed, sliding up the passage, climbing out in the Gryffindor common room, ignoring Ron and Hermione, who both tried to say something to him. He charged down hallways, taking a secret passage whenever he could, finally fetching up outside the door of Padfoot and Letha's quarters, hammering on it.

Letha yanked it open, holding her dressing gown closed with one hand. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry looked up at his Pack-mother, panting. "I know who the Heir of Slytherin is," he said breathlessly.

"Voldemort," said Dumbledore in a considering tone, tapping the ends of his fingers together. "And why do you think so?"

"Parseltongue, sir," said Harry, fingers crossed behind his back. His first wild certainty had given way slowly to worries that he might be wrong, that surely not only the family of Slytherin had ever been Parselmouths, that perhaps Voldemort had acquired the ability at some point with a potion or a spell. "He speaks Parseltongue. Like Slytherin did."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "And, Harry, as you do. But I certainly do not suspect you. My condolences on your loss, by the way."

"Thank you, sir." Harry felt Padfoot's hand on his shoulder briefly, comfortingly. He and Letha had heard what Harry had to say and brought him immediately to the Headmaster. "Sir, do you know if it's possible to learn Parseltongue? Or to get it from a spell, or a potion?"

"I do not know that, Harry, but I doubt it could be learned, as human languages may. I believe that many of the sounds snakes use to communicate are beyond the hearing range of an ordinary human. But at the moment, this is beside the point. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Lord Voldemort is indeed the Heir of Slytherin. It would, therefore, be he who opened the Chamber of Secrets."

"But how would he be here?" asked Padfoot. "Harry defeated him last year, and Danger killed off his host. Unless he's got a hold of another one since then..."

"Possible, but unlikely, Sirius. I have checked all the students and staff periodically since school resumed. None of them show any signs of being possessed by Voldemort. And I have made certain to do these checks all at the same time, so that there is no possibility of his moving from host to host to avoid my eye, as he did with such success last year." Dumbledore looked briefly apologetic. "Hagrid and the centaurs assure me there is nothing in the Forest which should

not be there, and the merpeople the same for the lake. I also have friends in the village, who keep an eye on things there for me.”

“So he’s nowhere around,” said Letha. “But that leaves us with the same problem as before. Who’s opened the Chamber?”

“Has it even been opened?” countered Padfoot. “This might just be a really nasty prank by someone who’s read up on Hogwarts history and wants to scare Muggleborns.”

“But why would they kill Siss?” asked Harry, trying as hard as he could to keep his voice from going into a little-boy whine. “Slytherin was supposed to like snakes. Why would someone who was trying to make us think he’s Slytherin’s Heir kill a snake?”

“And then there is the possibility that we have not even discussed,” said Dumbledore. “The possibility that Voldemort is not the Heir of Slytherin who has opened the Chamber of Secrets – for I do believe it has truly been opened. But I do also believe you are correct, Harry. Lord Voldemort is indeed an Heir of Slytherin. I thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

He stood and held out his hand to Harry, who got up himself to shake it. “Thank you for listening, sir,” he said.

“I do my best to listen to everyone, Harry. Good night.”

“Good night, sir.” Harry hugged Letha good night, and scent-touched Padfoot, before leaving.

This was probably going to be an unscheduled den-night. He had a lot to talk over with the Pride.

Sorrow for Siss continued to strike Harry at unexpected moments throughout the next few days, but he learned to deal with it, to put his head down for a few seconds and fight back the tears before lifting it again, to slide into the boys’ bathroom for a quick cry between classes. He wondered if this was what it was like to be a girl. He had a fuzzy impression that they cried a lot more readily than boys did.

The school was indeed buzzing about the Chamber of Secrets, but, to Harry's relief, nothing had gotten out about Siss. Percy, the only person aside from the Pack and the Pride who had seen her, was apparently keeping his mouth shut about it.

Harry realized Professor McGonagall must know when she returned his weekend homework on Tuesday with no comments about the two or three blurred spots where he hadn't quite been able to stop tears from falling. Hagrid had obviously been informed too, and just as obviously been told to keep it under wraps. He pulled Harry aside later that day to offer his condolences, and nearly squeezed the breath out of him with a hug.

On Wednesday morning, however, something happened which temporarily drove everything else out of Harry's mind.

"Eurgh!" said Ron's voice.

Harry rolled over and took a deep breath, then wished he hadn't. "Eurgh" was an understatement.

"That's disgusting. What is it?" he said, sitting up.

"Don't know, but it's really foul," said Seamus, pinching his nose shut. "Can't have been me, all my stuff's just back from the laundry."

"Mine too," said Dean. "After I fell in that mud last week, I had to wash everything."

"It's like there's more than one of whatever it is," said Neville, risking a second sniff and making a face.

Draco suddenly groaned. "I know what it is."

"What?" asked Harry. "And can you get rid of it?"

Draco fumbled for his wand. "Smellius Interruptus," he said, pointing it at his wardrobe.

"Oh, come on, Draco," said Ron. "Even I can tell that's not a real spell."

Draco ignored him, turning his wand on himself and repeating the incantation, then going around the room and doing the same to Harry, Ron, and Neville, and their belongings, while Seamus and Dean opened the windows.

The air in the room was decidedly fresher when Draco had finished. "Now what's not a real spell?" he said, looking challengingly at Ron.

"All right, you win," said Ron, shaking his head. "What happened?"

"Tell you later. I have to go find the girls. They're going to need it too – though I suppose Hermione's figured it out by now."

Hermione had indeed figured it out, as Harry found when he descended the stairs five minutes later, and further, she was perfectly willing to tell them what had caused the awful stench.

"It's the second half of the effect of that potion we left for Snape," she said, as they walked down to breakfast. "Three weeks after it's brewed, anything it's touched will start to smell terrible, and only stop when you use that incantation. The person who invented it thought it would be funny to make it respond to a spell that sounds completely fake."

"And Snape'll never think of it," said Ginny, grinning. "So his best cauldron's going to stink, and keep stinking."

"And so will Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," said Harry. "That stuff went all over everything."

"Does that mean we have to clean everything in the bathroom?" Neville looked worried. "There's so much in there."

"Don't worry, Neville, the spell's an area effect," said Draco. "So we'll be able to do sections at a time. With all of us working, we should get it done quickly."

"Except those of us who don't have a wand yet," said Meghan, pouting.

"You can be the boss, then," said Ron. "Crack the whip on us and make sure we don't slack."

"I wish you hadn't said that," said Harry as Meghan giggled. "She'll take you seriously."

"We can do it after lunch," said Luna. "Ginny and I have break then, and you five only have History of Magic, and Professor Binns never notices if you're late."

Snape spent the morning's Potions class glowering at everyone as if daring them to comment on the way he smelled. He had obviously gotten some of the potion on his skin or robes. The Pride worked assiduously, not daring to look at one another for fear they'd laugh out loud.

After lunch, they dealt with Myrtle's bathroom, Meghan checking off squares on a grid Hermione had drawn up to make sure they didn't miss anywhere. Myrtle thanked them a bit huffily when they were done.

"I think she liked the smell," said Ron as he and Harry prepared to leave. "Kept people out."

He opened the door, stepped out into the hall, blanched, and slammed it shut in Harry's face. Harry jumped back, just missing getting his finger caught in the hinges.

What the...

"RON! What are you doing here again?"

Percy. I should have known.

"Just having a look round," said Ron, trying to sound unconcerned and failing miserably, as far as Harry could tell from listening at the keyhole. "Seeing what we can pick up about where Harry's snake got killed."

Good story. I wouldn't have thought of that.

"I thought I told you to stay away from here! Do you have no respect for authority at all?"

"Course I do." The pause was highly significant.

"I," said Percy in tones of injured dignity, "am a school prefect."

"Oh, is that what that great P on your chest stands for? I thought it meant 'prat'."

Harry was having a very hard time keeping himself from bursting out laughing, which would ruin the whole game – Ron was obviously doing this so that he, Harry, would not also be discovered in the girls' bathroom and get into trouble. To calm himself, he took deep breaths through his nose, which was a mistake. The smell was back.

Damn, we must have missed a spot.

"That's detention," said Percy harshly. "Come with me. We're going straight to Professor McGonagall to arrange for it. And I'm writing to Mum about this."

Harry counted a slow twenty after their footsteps had faded before breathing a sigh of relief and opening the door.

"You owe me," said Ron to Harry that night at den. "A lot."
An owl dropped a letter in front of Aletha on Thursday at breakfast. "It's from Aunt Amy," she said, opening it and beginning to read.

"That's nice." Sirius took advantage of the distraction to try to steal some of Aletha's sausage.

She slapped his wrist without looking up from the letter. "Get your own."

Sirius Summoned the plate of sausages from the other end of the table, just in time to foil Snape's plan to take one, and gave the

Potions Master a cheery wave. "So what does she have to say?" he asked, dumping five links onto his plate.

"Nothing too important. Work is fine, her dance concert went well, she's helping organize this year's Nutcracker at the school she goes to. Oh, and she wants to know what the cubs' favorite colors are."

"Why?"

"She doesn't say. Something about Christmas gifts, probably."

"Harry likes red," said Sirius thoughtfully. "And Draco green, I think. Does Meghan prefer blue these days? I can't remember."

"She switches around a lot. I think it's yellow this week, but I'll ask her. I know Hermione likes blue for sure..."

Both their attentions were pulled by a roar from the Gryffindor table.

"RONALD WEASLEY! WHAT'S THIS I HEAR ABOUT YOU BEING CAUGHT IN A GIRLS' TOILET? THAT SORT OF BEHAVIOR IS ABSOLUTELY INAPPROPRIATE FOR A YOUNG MAN OF YOUR AGE..."

"So what age is it appropriate for?" asked Sirius, averting his eyes from Ron, who was turning the same color as his hair.

"...SPENDING MORE TIME ON SPYING THAN ON YOUR STUDIES, IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL WE'LL SEND YOU TO EAST COAST IN AMERICA, THAT'S ALL BOYS, THEN PERHAPS YOU WOULDN'T BE TEMPTED..."

"East Coast?" Sirius asked.

"Sister school to Salem Witches' Institute. Or maybe brother school would be more appropriate. Full name is the East Coast Wizards' School."

"Why are they segregated?"

"It's an American thing, I think."

"...NEVER BEEN SO ASHAMED OF ANY OF MY SONS, NOT EVEN FRED AND GEORGE, AND IF I HEAR YOU'VE BEEN SO MUCH AS THROWING SPITBALLS IN CLASS AFTER THIS WE'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT HOME AND PUT YOU INTO APPRENTICESHIP."

Aletha watched the Howler burst into flame. "Don't you dare," she said to Sirius.

"What?"

"Harry would never forgive you if you got Ron pulled out of Hogwarts."

"I wasn't even thinking about that!"

"Weren't you?"

"All right, I was thinking about it. But I wouldn't do it."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Well... I'd tell her it was a joke before she actually went through with it."

"So you would."

"You know I would."

Aletha looked at the ceiling, which today was a foggy sort of grey with patches of blue here and there and the sun just starting to peek through to one side. "And I stay with him, why?" she asked it rhetorically.

"You really owe me now," said Ron, still red-faced, as they left breakfast.

"I'll make it up to you," promised Harry. "What if I could get you into the first Quidditch match?"

“You mean to play?”

Harry nodded. “I think I can talk Wood into it. Do you want to?”

“Want to? I’d love to!”

“All right. Just let me work on it for a few days.”

Flying reminded Harry painfully of Siss, how she had loved to fly with him, but he forced himself to go to Quidditch practice anyway, and as the first game approached, even found that he was enjoying it again. As he had promised Ron, he began working on Wood, talking to him about how much Ron had improved, and how good it would be for him to get some actual field experience. Wood grunted noncommittally. Finally, about a week before the match, Harry brought out his best argument.

“I saw Slytherin practicing the other day,” he said. “They’ve got some nice brooms.”

“Some nice brooms?” Wood laughed resentfully. “Harry, they’ve all got Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones!”

“Yes, I noticed. Where’d they get them?”

“Someone donated them,” said Wood. “At least that’s what Flint said when I asked him. I’d bet you anything it’s someone’s father who doesn’t want to see his baby boy lose at Quidditch, because then he’d cry big salty tears and be all sad.”

Harry had seldom heard Wood this bitter. “You know, there’s a way you could show them you don’t care,” he suggested casually.

“What?”

“Field some of the reserve in this game. Like you’re saying Slytherin’s such a nothing team you don’t even have to put your first string in the field.”

“Hmm.” Wood seemed to be considering it. “As long as it wouldn’t make us lose,” he said. “I’m not worried about Black, he’ll do fine. It’s Weasley. He’s terrific when he’s on form, but if he misses one, he’ll miss seven more after it.”

“And that still gives us a margin of seventy when I catch the Snitch,” argued Harry. “Plus, our Chasers won’t just be sitting on their brooms. And if Ron’s no good in a game, isn’t it better to find that out now, when there’s still time to make it up in the rest of the year?”

Wood nodded. “All right, Harry, you’ve convinced me. I’ll put Weasley in this first game.”

Ron’s spirits were so much lifted by this news that he performed spectacularly during practice for the next week, bolstering Wood’s confidence further.

“Couldn’t have put in a good word for me at the same time, could you?” asked Draco a day or two before the game.

“I did. But I don’t think I needed to.” Harry looked across the common room. “Alicia’s been looking off-color for a couple of days now.” Their teammate was indeed dabbing at her nose with tissues in between scribbling on her parchment, and she was rather flushed, although she was sitting much farther from the fire than they were.

Draco grimaced as the portrait hole opened and Percy climbed in. “I hate being reserve. I’m always hoping people get sick, and then feeling bad for it.”

“At least you’re on the team,” said Ginny, tapping the two decks of Self-Shuffling cards twice with her wand to get them started. “I won’t even have a chance until next year. Come on, all in for Spoons.”

The Pride gathered around the table. The rules of Spoons were simple. Everyone got four cards, and had to pass cards around the table until someone got four of a kind. When that happened, that person had to take a spoon from the center. Then everyone else did as well. The trick was that there were always fewer spoons than

players. In this instance, with eight players, seven spoons, borrowed from the kitchens by Dobby, lay in the center of the table.

Draco was dealing. He gave everyone four cards, then started picking up new ones from the decks in front of him, passing them along to Meghan if he didn't want them, trading them into his hand and passing his discard if he did.

Meghan passed to Harry, who passed to Luna, who passed to Ron, who passed to Hermione, who glanced at it and snatched a spoon from the center, and everyone grabbed for the remaining ones. Neville and Ginny ended up tug-of-warring over it, and Ginny finally lost her grip on it and fell over backwards, laughing, as Neville held it up triumphantly.

They'd acquired an audience, Harry noticed. In fact, most of the common room was watching them.

"Maybe we should only play this in the Den from now on," he suggested quietly.

"Nah, I don't mind if you don't," said Ron, tossing his cards to Draco. "That's S, Gin."

"As if I didn't know." Ginny elbowed Neville. "I thought you were a nice boy."

Neville smiled a little sheepishly, dropping his prize back into the middle of the table, and didn't answer.

"Being nice in this game is how you lose," said Hermione, displaying her four sevens before handing them to Draco. He started the cards shuffling, then pushed them over to Meghan, who let them finish before she started dealing them out again.

And Neville could stand to be a touch less nice.

Harry felt a little mean for thinking this, but it was true. Neville was nice to everyone, to the point where he let some people walk all over him. The Pride could protect him from some of it...

But we shouldn't have to. We won't always be around.

"Harry!"

He looked up and realized there were three cards by his elbow. Everyone was staring at him indignantly.

"Sorry," he said, quickly picking them up and comparing them to his hand.

This round took a little longer, and it wasn't until Harry heard a slight jingle that he looked up and realized there was only one spoon left on the table. He lunged for it, but Ron had longer arms.

"Who got it?" he asked when he'd recovered his breath.

Draco held up four aces. "No one even noticed," he said smugly. "I am the king of sneaky."

Harry took the cards from Meghan and pulled out his wand. "I'll remember that when my Christmas presents go missing," he grumbled. "Everybody in."

In the Slytherin dormitory, Dudley Dursley sat by himself in a corner, stroking the wood of a beautiful broomstick.

Tomorrow, he knew, would be a day to remember.

"It's a beautiful day for Quidditch, isn't it? Cool and fair, not a cloud in the sky – well, all right, it's not all that cool, and there might be a cloud or two – in fact, there's quite a few, and was that thunder in the distance there? No matter, it's always a beautiful day for Quidditch, because Quidditch is a beautiful thing, and it's Gryffindor versus Slytherin today, so it's even more beautiful than usual. The classic battle, red against green, gold against silver, good against evil—"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor. They're lining up, there's the whistle – and the Quaffle is taken by Draco Black of Gryffindor, usually a reserve, today

playing for Alicia Spinnet, on the sick list this game – hope you feel better soon, Alicia, and the team’s vowed to win this one for you.”

Massive cheers from the Gryffindor section greeted this.

“Black halfway down the pitch already, he is really flying – passes to Angelina Johnson, who passes to – Marcus Flint! Marcus Flint of Slytherin has taken the Quaffle, intercepted a pass to Katie Bell, using the superior speed and maneuverability of his new Nimbus Two Thousand and One broomstick, the best model on the market today...”

Cheers from the Slytherin section mixed with boos and groans from the Gryffindors.

“Flint on his way back up the pitch, a Bludger intercepted by Beater Dursley, also normally a reserve, and about to face Keeper Ron Weasley, still another reserve – it’s the game of the reserves, it seems, Captain Oliver Wood trying to season some of his newer players, including Weasley, his eventual replacement... Flint taking his time over this, trying to fake Weasley out – YES! He’s been Bludgered – Weasleys stick together, nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, and Weasley recovers the Quaffle and passes to Bell...”

Lee’s voice became somewhat muffled, as if he were covering the microphone with his hand. “We’re going to have to do something about this, Professor, three Weasleys on a team is too many...”

Lee might feel that three Weasleys on a team was too many, but the Gryffindors at large didn’t seem to. Ron allowed only three of the next ten goal attempts to slip past him, and Katie and Angelina each scored twice, putting Gryffindor in a slight lead, as Draco took the Quaffle once again.

Harry was using his usual tactic of flying high, watching the field below him, when he felt something whiz by his left ear. He turned sharply, then lifted his left hand casually, as if to scratch his ear, and felt a tickle against his wrist.

“And the Gryffindor Seeker seems to be taking time out to scratch...” Lee’s commentary drifted up from below. “His team’s not that far up, though they’re starting to get there – Black nearing the Slytherin goals, some fancy flying there, he also has a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, meaning the Slytherins have no edge on him...”

Harry grinned to himself and aimed his broom for the Gryffindor goalposts, so as not to make Draco nervous by watching too closely.

“What were you doing up there?” Ron shouted to him.

“Just swatting a bug,” Harry yelled back, taking a position about fifteen feet above the goal hoops. He could see everything from here – Draco was darting and dodging around, bouncing the Quaffle off his hands, rolling it on the back on his arm, playing with the Slytherin Keeper and Chasers as he loved so much to do.

“Probably the left hoop,” muttered Harry, directing his broom a little higher so he could see better. “He usually goes to the left when he plays like that... come on, Draco, don’t drag it out too long... you’re not perfect, they could still steal... come on, shoot already...”

His attention was so much on the other end of the pitch that he never heard it coming. A sudden, blinding pain in the back of his head, a chill against his chest, and he was falling, falling forever, until forever ended abruptly with another pain, this one in his neck and back... Draco aimed and threw, and the Quaffle soared through the left goal hoop.

“BLACK SCORES! Fifty-thirty to Gryffindor!”

Cheers echoed around the stadium. Danger added her voice to them, pumping her fist in the air.

That’s my fox! My little boy, all grown up... I’m so proud...

Her next cheer died in her throat as her pendants went suddenly, horribly cold.

What in the world? Who...

“Harry!” shouted Remus, pointing at the other end of the pitch. Danger’s head whipped around.

Harry was falling through the air, arms and legs outflung. Ron was staring up at him in horror, frozen. It was a feeling Danger could appreciate.

I have to help him, I have to do something...

But nothing would cooperate with her. Her body, and her magic, seemed to have been Petrified, neither would respond to her at all...

With a sickening sound like a side of beef being dropped, Harry’s body struck the center goal hoop, arching backwards over it in a parody of a backbend. The sight shocked Danger out of her trance.

Bring him here! she cried inwardly, and what was left of her wild magic responded. She would pay a heavy toll for it later, but Harry was hurt – he needed prompt treatment if he was to have even a chance –

She flung out her arms to receive him, and gasped at his weight. Remus was gone, he must be fetching Madam Pomfrey, she would have to deal with Harry herself for the moment. People were hastily vacating the bench on either side of her. She moved down and ever so carefully slid Harry off her lap. His face was white and still, and cold as she touched it, and his hands were limp in her grasp...

Pounding feet on the stairs signaled the arrival of Sirius and Aletha, Remus and Madam Pomfrey right behind them, and Neville and the girls right behind them, as Draco and Ron vaulted off their brooms into the stands and raced up to where Harry was lying, with Madam Pomfrey now running her wand up and down him, her face grim.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” a frightened voice was saying. Danger turned and found herself face to face with Dudley Dursley. The Slytherin looked close to tears. “I didn’t mean to,” he said, staring at her. “I didn’t mean him to fall. It was just part of the game. He wasn’t supposed to fall. Is he going to be all right?”

"I don't know," said Danger, and commanded her voice to stop shaking. Of course Harry would be all right. He was strong. He had survived worse than this. "I don't know."

Come here, said Remus, his tone flat. She wants to tell us all together.

Danger turned and took the three steps that brought her to Remus' side. Is it bad?

I think it is. Her love was very pale, Danger saw as she looked at him. She hadn't seen him looking like this since the first day they'd met, when he'd been depressed and suffering from the effects of an upcoming full moon. Aletha was standing very still, almost visibly preparing for bad news. Sirius was white, his hands clutching his robes.

Madam Pomfrey looked away from Harry, up at the four adults, and slowly shook her head. "There's nothing I can do," she said. "There's no way to repair damage this extensive, even if it were safe to move him, and there's no time in any case. I'm so sorry."

Sorry? Nothing she can do? She's talking as if...

Madam Pomfrey looked back at Harry. "He should have died on impact," she said quietly. "He's dying now."

The word rippled through the crowd. "Dying... he's dying... Harry Potter's dying..."

Danger felt her knees give way. Remus lowered her gently to the bench, sitting beside her, holding her against him, keeping her upright, though she wanted nothing more than to collapse and cry.

No. No. This is all my fault, if I'd only pulled him in a second sooner... if I hadn't hesitated...

Sirius was on his knees beside Harry, clutching his godson's hand, searching Harry's face for signs of life, unashamed tears falling from

his eyes. Harry's left sleeve seemed to have taken on a life of its own, Danger noticed irrelevantly, jerking about oddly, as if something within it wanted to escape. Aletha reached over Sirius' shoulder and slid her hand up the sleeve, emerging with something small and golden, which beat silver wings against her fingers.

"It was a Plumptre Pass," she said, her voice very strained, as she displayed the Snitch. "Gryffindor's won."

And he didn't tell anyone because he wanted to give Draco a chance to score...

How fitting, that the last thing he did was win a Quidditch game.

Last thing. The words echoed inside her head, growing louder every time. The last thing. The last thing he did.

Because he's dying.

A scream shattered the silence of the darkened Quidditch pitch, as the first drops of rain began to fall.

"NO!"

(A/N: Please don't kill me. I can't update if I'm dead. So please don't kill me. (Payback's a witch, isn't it, 5684?) Just please don't kill me. (Think I've gotten the point across yet?) Please... ah, you know it by now. I'll shut up and let you review.)

Chapter 27: On Eagle's Wings

Dying? Harry?

Draco had never heard anything so ridiculous. It was all a stupid mistake. Madam Pomfrey was overreacting. Harry was going to be fine. He'd just been playing Quidditch. No one died from playing Quidditch.

Not at Hogwarts. But people have died in the professional leagues. Falling from too high, or being struck by lightning during storms...

But Harry hadn't been struck by lightning, and he hadn't fallen very far. He'd hit his back on the goal hoop, that was all. No one could die from something like that.

Wait. Something's not right here. Harry doesn't just fall off his broom. He never has. Not even when he was just learning to fly. I fell, Hermione fell, Meghan fell. Harry never fell.

He noticed Dudley Dursley standing a short distance away, shaking all over and clutching his Beater's bat. "I didn't mean to," the Slytherin boy was whimpering. "I didn't mean to..."

Didn't mean to what? What did he do?

"It was just part of the game, I didn't mean for him to fall..."

Draco felt as if he'd missed a step he hadn't even known existed.

He hit Harry with a Bludger. He must have. Harry wouldn't just fall. Dursley hit him with a Bludger, that's why this all happened –

He was angry now, but it wasn't hot, red anger like he'd read about. No, this anger was cold and deliberate, and frightened him a little as he felt it. He wanted to get hold of Dursley and hurt him. He wanted to make him suffer, make him suffer for a long time – he wanted revenge for what this boy had just done to his brother –

Meghan's scream barely registered in his ears.

“NO!”

Meghan was standing on a bench, fists clenched, body tense. “Harry is not going to die!”

“Meghan, sweetheart... we can’t do anything about it.” The wind was picking up now that the rain had started, Aletha noticed. Brown hair and red mingled as Hermione, her face set, held a sobbing Ginny, and Meghan’s blue robes were billowing out behind her. “We can’t change this.”

The certainty in her daughter’s eyes that her parents could fix everything, which had somehow survived everything the Pack had been through, flickered once and went out. “He can’t die,” she repeated, but with a little less conviction this time. “He can’t. He has to be a warrior and fight evil. This isn’t evil. It was just a mistake.”

Someone, somewhere, will appreciate the irony in this a lot more than I can right now. The boy who survived not one, but two, attempts on his life by the most evil wizard in the world, killed in a freak accident at a Quidditch match. At Hogwarts, the one place where he should have been safest.

Why, why didn’t anyone see him in time? Why didn’t I?

“I won’t let Harry die,” Meghan declared, stamping her foot. “I won’t, I won’t, I won’t...”

Someone else was shouting nearby, but Aletha’s attention was fixed on her daughter. Meghan’s robes were still whipping around her – but everyone else’s had become still. The beads on her short braids were beginning to clack together in the force of a wind no one else could feel. And –

No, I’m not imagining it. She’s glowing. What in the world...
Draco was halfway down the stands when something got in between him and Dursley. He looked up, ignoring the raindrops falling on his face.

“Get out of my way, Ron,” he said through clenched teeth.

Instead of moving, Ron shoved him so hard that he fell backwards over a bench and banged his back and shins painfully. "OW! What the hell?"

"This is all your fault!" yelled Ron, looming over him. He seemed to be feeling the hot anger of the stories – his face was as flushed as it got when he was embarrassed, and his eyes looked like the flames on Danger's stove, blazing blue. "If everyone hadn't been watching you and your damn fancy moves, maybe someone would have noticed in time!"

Draco's anger found another target as he pulled himself painfully to his feet. "Oh really? And who was sitting right there just watching him fall? Or don't you count as someone? Why didn't you fly up there and catch him?"

"Because by the time I got my eyes off you, it was too late!" Ron shoved him again, but he was ready this time, and took it on his feet. "Besides, what good would it have done? He'd already been hit with the Bludger. I might just have made things worse."

"Oh, 'might just have made things worse,'" Draco sneered, imitating Ron's voice mockingly. "Or maybe you were just tired of being Harry Potter's friend. Maybe you thought, with him gone, I can finally stand out a little. Maybe you thought you'd be the next alpha of the Pride. How about it?"

"Tired of being his friend? You're out of your mind! You've been jealous of me since the first day we met, because Harry always liked me better than he liked you! So you go and do this!" Ron screamed the last word, pointing up the stands to where Harry was lying. "You're nothing but a stinking Slytherin in disguise, Malfoy! How much did you pay Dursley to help you murder him?"

Draco's answer to this was non-verbal but very definite, and involved his foot, Ron's knee, and a lot of pain for the red-haired boy –

But Ron's leg wasn't where he was expecting it to be, and Ron's arm was coming around fast, with a lethal-looking fist on the end of it –

Damn it, we should never have practiced self-defense at den-nights...

Draco ducked, abandoned rational thought, and attacked his enemy. Harry was surely dead by now, and it was all Ron's fault – he would make Ron pay – maybe he would get one of Ron's brothers and hurt him, just so Ron could see how it felt –

The callousness of his thoughts appalled him so much that he stopped hitting Ron for a second, and in that second Ron's fist connected with the side of his head so hard he saw stars.

He'll pay for that, too...

"I won't, I won't, I won't..." Meghan's litany was picking up speed, her fists were coming up in front of her as if she were preparing to fight, and the unearthly blue light around her was becoming brighter. "I won't! I won't! I won't let him!"

She leapt from the bench, and for one instant, the light and her robes combined to make the shape of wings streaming from her shoulders. The leap carried her to the next bench up, and from there she landed beside Harry, on the other side of him from Sirius, who was still kneeling there, but had raised his head to stare open-mouthed at his daughter, her hands now open and shining with blue power.

"I won't let Harry die!" shrieked Meghan, and snatched Harry's hands in her own before anyone could stop her.

Sirius fell backwards as a burst of blue light engulfed both cubs. Aletha staggered back a step as the shockwave reached her, and shielded her eyes against it.

When she could look again, Meghan was kneeling beside her Pack-brother, Harry's pale and lifeless hands enclosed by her small brown ones. The light had expanded to cover both of them, and was pulsing, flashing slightly brighter about once a second, or a little faster –

Heartbeat rate. Assuming Harry's heart is still beating.

Aletha moved slowly closer to her cubs, watching them carefully. Meghan's breathing was slow but even and deep. Harry's was the same. In fact –

It's exactly the same. They're breathing in rhythm. Meghan's chest rose and fell at the same moments Harry's did. They even paused for the same moment between breaths.

Sirius got to his feet beside her, ignoring the soft rain now falling, his eyes never leaving the two. "What is she doing?" he asked hesitantly.

"I don't know. But look at how they're breathing."

Sirius nodded slowly, watching them. "Together. Perfectly together. As if..."

"As if what?"

"It's stupid."

"Say it anyway."

"As if there's only one of them. One mind. One soul. Or one of them controlling the other one..."

"For an amateur, you're remarkably close," said Madam Pomfrey's voice, making them both jump. The nurse had recovered from what Meghan had done faster than either of them, and had been examining the pair of children. "I can't be positive, but she appears to be supporting his life with her own. Forcing his body to accept the commands given by hers, breathing and heartbeat and the like."

"I didn't know that was possible," said Aletha.

"Neither did I. However, since it is happening, possible it must be. She's never done anything of this sort before, I take it?"

Sirius shook his head. "How long can she do this?" he asked, his voice starting to return to normal. "And will it do any good?"

“If we can get them to the hospital wing, it might do a great deal of good. I wouldn’t recommend touching them, and separating them at this point would probably be disastrous, but...” Madam Pomfrey ran her wand over Harry once more. “His injuries do not appear to be as severe as I had thought at first. And with her supporting him, he’s unlikely to die of shock. If we can get them to the castle quickly, I might be able to save him.”

“ENOUGH!” shouted a furious voice, and suddenly Draco was pulled away from Ron, shoved to his knees, and a hand was gripping his throat, forcing his head back until he was looking into different blue eyes, ones he knew well, though he had never seen Moony this angry, never. He wondered for an instant if Moony was like Ron, and thought that Draco had done this to Harry, had schemed and connived like a Slytherin to kill his own brother –

I was thinking like a Slytherin when I was fighting Ron.

No, it’s worse than that.

I was thinking like my father.

All the fight went out of him when he realized that. He could only look at Moony and shake, and wonder what was about to happen to him.

“What. Were. You. Doing?” Moony punctuated each word with a very slight tightening of his fingers, not painful or cutting off Draco’s breath, but making his authority unquestionable. “I want an explanation, and I want it now.” His hand came away, but his expression made it quite clear that punishment was not yet over.

“He said I did it,” babbled Draco, pointing at Ron, whom he now saw was being forcibly restrained by Fred and George. “He said I planned it with Dursley – that I did fancy tricks so everyone would watch me and no one would notice – he called me a Slytherin, and a Malfoy, and he thinks I killed Harry!”

Moony’s breath came out in a rush. “Dammit,” he said on the end of it. “I was afraid of something like that. And what did you say to him?”

Draco gulped. Luna was standing nearby, he noticed suddenly, watching him closely, and his reluctance to tell this doubled. As if she had sensed his unease, she gave him a small smile, then turned and walked away.

At least she doesn't have to hear it.

"I asked him... why he didn't do anything," he admitted when Luna had gone. "Why he didn't try to save Harry. I said I thought he was jealous, and he wanted to be the new alpha of the Pride, so he just let it happen."

Moony's face settled into lines Draco was very familiar with. It was his "stupid-idiot-boys" look, the one he wore if Draco or Harry played a prank and let themselves be caught. "I should have known," he said wearily. "You're frightened, you're angry, you're looking for someone to blame. But Ron is not it, and neither are you. No one is to blame for this, Draco. It was an accident."

"Some accident! Harry's dead!"

Moony offered Draco his hand. "No, he's not," he said, pulling Draco to his feet.

"He's not?"

"No. He's not."

Sirius had his wand out before Madam Pomfrey had even finished speaking, conjuring a stretcher-like object with two levels which would have been impossible in the Muggle world, but that was what magic was good for. Neither Harry nor Meghan moved as Sirius levitated them out of the stands and down towards the castle, only not running, Aletha thought, because he might slip on the wet grass and fall if he ran.

"May I ask what seems like an odd question?" asked Madam Pomfrey as she and Aletha hurried across the grounds ahead of Sirius, so as to be ready in the hospital wing when he arrived.

"Of course."

"You know Meghan so much better than I do. How strong is she? Not physically, not even mentally... I suppose the proper word is spiritually. But not in any religious sense. I mean her soul."

It was an odd question. Aletha thought about it for a short while. "If a soul's health can be measured by the ability to love, Meghan's got a stronger one than most," she said finally, as they climbed the front stairs of the castle. "You saw how angry she was at the thought of someone she loved dying. She took it as a personal insult. She loves very strongly, and very fiercely. I would say her soul is a fine healthy one."

"Excellent. Because the answer to your husband's other question is directly related to that."

"Other question? About how long Meghan can hold this?"

"Yes. The spells I use indicate not only the health of a person's mind and body, but their soul. And whatever Meghan is doing with Mr. Potter is coming directly from her soul. I have no idea how much energy it is using, nor how much her soul can give. But if there is any time limit on this, that is where it lies."

Meghan's soul. Dear God, what if she tires herself out, or loses control? Will she and Harry both be lost forever? Dead, or worse than dead?

But if she hadn't done... whatever she's doing, we would have lost him by now. And I couldn't very well have stopped her. I had no idea what she was about to do.

But I still should have done something...

Aletha carefully clamped down on her thoughts and stopped trying to convince herself this wasn't her fault. She knew it already with her rational mind, and there would be no convincing her emotions of anything for some time to come, until she got a definite answer one way or another as to what was happening to her beloved cubs.

Until then, she would just have to carry on.

I ought to be good at it. Been doing it for years.

“Who’s not what?” asked Fred, sitting on Ron’s legs.

“Harry is not dead,” said Moony, a little louder, and Ron abruptly stopped thrashing. “He’s badly hurt, but not as badly as Madam Pomfrey thought at first. He’s being taken to the hospital wing. And no one here,” his eyes moved to Dursley, who was standing as far from the group as he could be and still hear what was going on, “harmed him on purpose. Mr. Dursley was playing Beater for Slytherin, so he tried to take out the Gryffindor Seeker with a Bludger, as his position calls for. He never intended Harry to be seriously injured.”

Dursley nodded frantically. “I’m so sorry, sir,” he said. “I must have hit it harder than I thought – I really didn’t know I could do that – I mean, I knew the Bludgers tried to knock players off their brooms, but I’d never seen one hit anyone that hard before...”

George got off Ron’s chest and Fred off his knees, letting him up. Ron’s nose was bleeding heavily – Moony changed that with a muttered spell that sounded to Draco’s ears a bit like he’d said “whiskey” – and his hair was in complete disarray. “He’s not dead?” he repeated, blinking hard, and Draco realized that not all the wetness on Ron’s face was due to the rain.

“No. He’s not dead. Let’s go up to the castle and see what we can find out.” Moony turned and went up the stands to where Danger was lying on a bench, eyes shut.

“Fine time to take a nap,” said George.

“She’s not napping,” Draco defended his Pack-mum. “She used a lot of magic to pull Harry in from the field. It wears her out.”

“Wish she’d done it earlier,” said Ron as Moony conjured a stretcher for Danger.

So do I...

The pitch was almost deserted, Draco noticed as they left. Everyone else was most of the way to the castle, the older students holding the rain off with their wands. Moony had conjured a large umbrella for their little group and given it to Ron, the tallest of them, to carry, since he was busy with Danger.

Draco stayed close to his Pack-father. He didn't want to make it too obvious in front of Ron and the twins, but he was very shaken. Harry might not be dead, but he had still been badly hurt. What if he woke up paralyzed somehow, not able to move his legs or his arms? Or what if he went into one of those sleeps that were like death, the ones people didn't wake up from?

"The word you're looking for is 'coma'," said Moony quietly, "and thinking aloud is a bad habit."

"Yes, Moony."

Draco hung back a bit as Ron ran through the front door of the castle, no longer held to the sedate pace of the umbrella-holder. The twins were only a few steps behind.

"Was Madam Pomfrey wrong?" Draco asked, unable to contain himself any longer. "Did she just make a mistake saying Harry was dying?"

"Truthfully, fox, I don't know." Moony guided the stretcher up the steps. They weren't getting wet, Draco noticed, even though Ron had taken the umbrella inside with him. And his robes were drying out, and comfortably warm...

"Are you dry yet?" asked Moony as they came inside. "If not, just tell me."

Oh. Of course. "I'm dry."

"Good. Ah, and here comes a messenger from on high."

Hermione was running down the stairs. "He's still alive," she said breathlessly. "But Padfoot and Letha want you to come up as soon as you can. They don't know what's going on at all."

"What, and they think I do?"

Hermione smiled. "No. But they think it'll be nicer to have all the people who don't know what's going on together."

"Is that a direct quote?"

Hermione nodded.

"I have yet to see Sirius in a situation where he was unable to joke for more than thirty minutes," said Moony, beginning to climb the stairs. "Azkaban excepted, of course."

Hermione fell in behind him, and whispered to Draco, "But it was Letha who said it."

Draco couldn't resist laughing a little. The world was still uncertain and frightening, but one huge weight had been lifted. Harry wasn't dead.

Yet.

Everything was very quiet in the hospital wing. Neville was over by the window, looking confused, but Luna was standing next to him talking to him quietly, so that might be why. Moony was fussing over Danger, and Padfoot and Letha were standing nearby talking, all of them carefully avoiding looking at the bed where Harry was lying, no longer looking quite as though he were dead but certainly nothing like his usual self, with Meghan kneeling by his side, her hands around his and her head bowed. A blue light shone around them, flashing slightly brighter periodically. About seventy beats a minute, Draco estimated, thinking of a metronome.

Ron was sitting on the end of one of the beds, holding Ginny, who didn't seem to be crying anymore but wasn't showing her face either. Draco waited until Ron's attention wandered over to him, then lifted his hands to his face and stroked both of them down his cheeks. It

was one of the simpler of the Marauder signs, though not one the Marauders themselves had often used.

It meant, Sorry.

Yes, you are, Ron mouthed.

Draco flashed him a far more well-known hand sign. Ron did it back, then opened his hand and made the apology motion down his own face as well.

Draco signed a thank you, then turned it into one of the obscene gestures he'd learned from careful observation of Peeves, which Ron returned with interest.

"I feel as if I should be telling you to go wash your hands out with soap," said Letha quietly from behind him.

"Not a bad idea," said Draco equally quietly. "I'm still all messy from the game."

"Madam Pomfrey will probably let you use the bathroom in here to clean up. I'm afraid I don't want you leaving just yet. Not because you did anything, but because of the rest of the school."

"They'll want to know about Harry, and they won't leave me alone."

"Precisely. I don't want you harassed right now. You know who to call to get some clean robes."

Draco did indeed. "Dobby," he called quietly as soon as he was alone in the bathroom.

The house-elf appeared, but he looked very different from usual. Instead of smiling cheerily and asking what Draco wanted, he was curled into a ball, sobbing into a Hogwarts tea towel such as the other elves wore for clothing, though he sprang to his feet as soon as he realized where he was. "M-m-master Draco! D-dobby was not expecting..."

"It's all right, Dobby, I can call somebody else," said Draco hastily. "You don't have to stay."

Dobby shook his head and blew his nose vigorously on the towel. "Dobby will do his duty, sir," he said, Vanishing the towel with a snap of long fingers. "Only... Dobby wonders if Master Draco would tell him if the rumors are true?"

"What rumors?"

"About Harry Potter, sir... the house-elves have heard that Harry Potter is dying..."

"No, that's not true," said Draco emphatically, hoping this didn't fall under Letha's ban on talking to people. "Harry's not dying. He had a bad accident, but Meghan's doing something to help him. We don't know yet what's going to happen, but he's not dying."

Dobby brightened right away. "Little Mistress Meghan will save Harry Potter! Dobby knows she will! What does Master Draco need?"

Well, that didn't take much. "Can you get me a full change of clothes from my things? And bring one for Ron Weasley as well," Draco added after a moment's thought. We did make up, and he's going to be just as sweaty as I am.

Dobby returned less than a minute later with a teetering stack of clothes in his arms. "Here you are, Master Draco!" he said happily. "The clothes on the top are yours, and the ones on the bottom are the Wheezy's."

Draco smothered a laugh. "Thanks, Dobby. I think that's everything."

Does Ron know what the house-elves call him?

He took a quick shower, got into his clean clothing, and emerged from the bathroom feeling much better. "Anything?" he asked Hermione quietly.

She shook her head. "But it's funny. Madam Pomfrey was all set to start treating Harry, but Professor Dumbledore came in and talked with her and the Pack-parents all quietly, and she hasn't done anything since then. She keeps checking him and saying nothing's changed. But how can anything change if she won't do anything?"

Draco looked across the room at Harry and Meghan, so still they might have been waxworks, while the blue light pulsed around them. Was it his imagination, or was it a little dimmer than it had been? "I don't know. Ron, there's clean robes for you in there if you want to wash up."

"Thanks," said Ron, looking a bit surprised. "Ginny, I'm going to go use the washroom, all right? Will you go to Hermione for a bit?"

"I'm not three years old, Ron," said Ginny tiredly, lifting her face and displaying red-rimmed eyes. She managed a very watery smile. "Though I feel a bit like it."

"We're all scared," said Hermione, sitting in the place Ron had vacated and putting her arm around the younger girl. "I hate not knowing what's going on."

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Luna, startling them all. She had drifted up behind them without their noticing. "Meghan's helping Harry."

"Helping him?" repeated Ginny. "How?"

Luna shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she's talking to his soul."

"Talking to his soul?" Luna was often obscure, Draco knew, but this was worse than usual. "And saying what?"

"Don't go away," suggested Neville, who had joined them as well.

A little shiver passed through the Pride. If Harry's soul went away, that would mean...

That would mean we're a Pride without an alpha.

And somewhere out there is a Dark Lord who can rise again with no one to stop him.

Luna was sitting next to him now, leaning on him, and his arm had gone around her at some point. Hermione laid her head on his shoulder for a moment before sitting up again, and Neville sat down beside Luna, who took his hand in hers and held it comfortingly. Ron, when he emerged from the bathroom, sat down on Ginny's other side, but soon had her practically in his lap, putting him beside Hermione as well.

They waited.

"I'm beginning to think you might have been right," said Sirius to Remus, quietly, from the other end of the hospital wing. "About the denning. Look at them. Twelve-year-old boys just do not do that on the spur of the moment."

"It could just be a result of shock, you know. But thank you for the vote of confidence, Padfoot. We're going to need it."

"Does Danger know that Harry's not actively dying?" asked Aletha, looking down at her friend's face, lined with worry that not even magically-induced unconsciousness could erase.

"I think so. I had to leave her around then, to break up the fight, but I get a sense of lessened worry from her that I wouldn't if she had gone under thinking he was about to die."

"When should she be up?"

"A few hours, I think. It wasn't much she did."

"Wish she'd done it a second or two earlier," said Sirius, looking at Harry and Meghan.

"So do we all," snapped Remus, then fought down his temper. "So do we all," he repeated more quietly. "What do you think Albus meant, 'let her finish'?"

"I don't know," said Aletha. "And I didn't like the sound of 'tapping the castle'."

"No, I think that's a good thing," said Sirius. "Pearl's strong for her age, but she's still only nine. And she's doing wandless magic. That takes a lot out of even a grown witch. If she can use some of the magic accumulated around Hogwarts, I'm all for it. Anything that gets her and Harry back alive."

Remus and Aletha nodded.

I'd give my life for them in an instant. Any of us would. But any of us would tear a hole in the Pack that would take years to heal, if it ever would.

There are downsides to being so interconnected and so much loved. Every so often, it might be nice to be expendable.

And he would have felt so much better if he hadn't been positive that the light around his cubs was ever so slowly fading. It was dark and cold in here, and he was tired. The Quidditch match must have gone on longer than he'd expected. All he wanted was to get to bed, and a bed was just beyond the door in the opposite wall. He knew it was, he could feel it. A soft, warm bed, with clean, crisp sheets and fluffy blankets, and his mum to tuck him in...

My mum?

He didn't know where the thought had come from, but it was true. He was convinced of it. If he could just get through that door, he would see his mum. And his dad, of course. They were never far apart.

"You would have thought someone had put a Permanent Sticking Charm on them," laughed a woman's musical voice.

He should know who the speaker was, he thought, but the name fluttered out of reach as he tried to grasp it. It wasn't important anyway. What was important was getting through that door. It was opening, slowly, almost reluctantly, but it was opening. He could see

the light beyond it, and he wanted to get to that light. And soon, the door would be open enough for him to go to it.

His parents were waiting in that light, along with everything he'd ever wanted. All he had to do was wait until the door opened wide enough, and then walk through.

"Harry!"

He blinked. Was that his name? Harry? He was answering to it, so he supposed it must be his. But who had called him?

"Harry, down here!"

Harry looked at the floor. A small green snake was reared up, eyes fixed on him. "Harry, my eggling, what are you doing here?" she hissed in concerned tones. "Please tell me you are not looking for me."

"No, I wasn't looking for you, Siss," said Harry, the snake's name coming easily to his lips, although he had all but forgotten it a moment before. "I'm not really sure how I got here. I was playing Quidditch, and then a lot of things hurt, and then I was here. Where did you come from?"

"I came through the door." Siss indicated the door she meant, though she didn't need to. It was the only one in the room, and Harry wondered slightly how he had gotten in, since he knew he hadn't come that way. The things beyond that door were so wonderful that he would never have wanted to leave that place.

He followed that train of thought and came up with a contradiction. "Why did you leave?" he asked. "Don't you like it in there?"

"I like it in there very much. But I was drawn by your being here. It is not a place you should be. Not for a long time yet."

Harry's attention was drawn by the door. It was opening a little wider – he might be able to squeeze through now if he really tried. "I know I

shouldn't be here," he said, getting up. "I should be there. Through that door. With my parents."

"No, Harry!" Siss' tone was almost desperate, and Harry stopped to look at her. "That is the place of journey's ending. Your journey is scarcely begun. I gave my life to be sure of that. You cannot pass through that door yet."

"But it's open! They're waiting for me!"

"We will wait as long as we must," said Siss with certainty. "And you have other things you must do. Things you must return to, in the world outside. You cannot pass through that door."

Harry hesitated for one more moment, then made up his mind. Siss was talking nonsense. The door was open, and he was going to go through it –

But he had waited too long.

"NO!" shrieked a little girl's voice, and Siss fled through the door the instant before a girl in blue robes dashed into the room, seemingly from nowhere, and threw herself against the door, slamming it shut before Harry could reach it. "Harry, you can't!"

"Who—" Harry began, but stopped as recognition hit him. "Meghan! You shouldn't be here!"

"Neither should you," said Meghan, panting, her back pressed against the door. "You can't stay here, Harry. You have to come back with me."

"I don't have to go anywhere with you. You have to leave and let me get through that door."

"No! Harry, don't you understand what's going on? You're..." Meghan stopped. A strange expression crossed her face. "You're..." she began again, then stopped again, and growled in frustration. "I can't tell you what's going on. But you can't go in there!"

“Why not? Meghan, everything I want is on the other side of that door. Why won’t you let me have it?”

“Because it’s not time yet. Harry, there are things you have to do. Things you have to be. You can’t just walk away from all of that now.”

“Watch me,” said Harry, and made to pull her away from the door. She was being an interfering pest, just like she always was. He would show her – he would take her through the door with him, and she would see how nice it was there, and she wouldn’t want to leave either...

Meghan caught his hands with her own. “You really want to go through there?” she asked, her little face very serious. “You won’t see me again for a long time if you do.”

That’s what you think. “That’s supposed to be a bad thing?” Harry said aloud.

“Or Hermione, or Draco, or Ron, or Dadfoot and Mama Letha and Moony and Danger, or anybody else.”

Harry shrugged. “I told you, everything I want is over there. If I want them, they’ll be there. So it’s not a big deal. Now, I’m going through there, and you’re not going to stop me.” He started pulling her away from the door again.

Meghan let him pull, then ran all the way around him and got her back to the door again just in time to keep him from reaching the handle.

“Pearl, I don’t want to hurt you,” said Harry with a sigh. “But I’m going to have to, if you keep getting in the way. I’m going through that door, whether you want me to or not.”

Meghan looked at the floor. “I understand,” she said quietly. “But will you do one thing for me first?”

“One thing like what?”

“Dance with me?”

“Dance with you?”

“Yes. One last dance, before you go.”

Harry looked around the small stone room where they stood. “Here?”

“Do you see anywhere else?”

“We could dance in there,” Harry suggested casually, pointing at the door. “There’s more light, and more room, and I bet there’s music.”

Meghan shook her head firmly. “Uh-uh. I want to dance here.”

Harry recognized the set of her jaw. She was determined to get him to do this. Well, if it would make her stop getting in his way so he could get where he was going without hurting her, he’d do it. “My lady, may I have this dance?” he asked, bowing formally to her.

“Kind sir, I would be delighted.” Her curtsy was very grand.

They took the waltz position, and as Meghan stepped away from the door in the first moves of the dance, it crept open again. Harry was tempted simply to drop Meghan’s hands and run – she wouldn’t be able to stop him in time, he was much bigger and faster than she was, and he was between her and the door now – but he had promised to dance with her, or at least agreed, and he wasn’t going to go back on his word. The door wouldn’t go away.

As they danced, though, Harry began to remember things. Little things about himself, things he’d somehow forgotten. Things like where he lived. In the school year, he lived at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he was a student, a part of Gryffindor House, so he lived up in Gryffindor Tower, seven floors above the ground. During the summers, it was the Marauders’ Den, the big, airy house in Devon always filled with light and laughter and good smells from the kitchen. He liked helping in the kitchen. Helping Danger.

The name sparked new recollections. Danger, giving him a good-luck hug before the match. Moony, with one hand on his shoulder and one on Draco's, looking so proud and saying something about his two Quidditch players. Draco, playing around with the Quaffle down by the Slytherin goal posts...

And then something hit me in the back of the head. It hurt a lot. Must have been a Bludger.

And... did I fall? I think I fell. I never fall! What happened?

And then I hit my back on something, and that hurt even worse...

The room seemed larger now. Brighter, too. He could see Meghan's face a lot more clearly. She looked as if she'd been crying. "Pearl, what's wrong?" he asked.

"What's wrong? You mean you don't even know?"

"No. What is it?"

"Harry, you almost died!"

Harry missed a step in the dance. "I what?"

"You fell off your broom and onto the Gryffindor goal hoop," said Meghan, looking up at him earnestly. "You were twenty feet up from it at least. And Madam Pomfrey said there wasn't anything she could do about it. That the damage was too extensive, and that you were dying."

"But then why don't I hurt?" Harry looked down at himself. He was still wearing his red Quidditch robes, and his body seemed to be moving about as well as it ever had in his dance lessons at home. "If I got so badly hurt, how did I get here?"

Meghan shook her head. "I don't know."

The room was getting larger, Harry saw now. It was warmer too. And the door he'd been so keen to go through was no more than an

outline in the wall – but that didn't make any sense. Doors didn't just disappear.

No, that wasn't quite true. Some doors did disappear, when they weren't needed any more. Or when you weren't supposed to go through them.

I thought my parents were on the other side of that door. And Siss came from there.

But Siss and my parents are dead.

So maybe if I'd gone through that door...

"Meghan, what did you do when you found out I was... you know?"

Meghan looked a little sheepish. "I screamed out that I wouldn't let you," she said. "Then I felt funny. Like I could do things nobody else could do – almost like I could fly – and I knew if I could just touch you, I could make everything all right. I jumped over benches and grabbed your hands, and then all of a sudden I was running, and I knew I had to stop you from going through that door." She nodded to the outline of the door. "Because if you did, that would mean..."

It would mean I was dead.

That's what Siss meant. She wanted me to live, not to die. So does Meghan. So will all the Pack, and the Pride.

And so do I!

In the instant of that thought, the door vanished entirely, and Harry suddenly felt very dizzy and weak. He stumbled, breaking the rhythm of the dance. Meghan supported him until he got his balance again.

"We have to go back," she said. "We can't stay here much longer. It's making me tired." Now that Harry really looked, he could see that her face had an unhealthy gray tinge to it, and her eyes were red.

Of course, that could be from crying...

"I don't feel too good either," he admitted. "Did I really get hurt badly?"

Meghan nodded. "But Madam Pomfrey said she could treat you. We just have to get back to our bodies."

Harry took a deep breath. "Which way?" he asked, looking at the multitude of corridors which had formed in the stone walls while they were dancing.

"I don't know." Meghan leaned on him. "I just don't know."

Draco more felt the hum than heard it at first, since he was concentrating so hard on Harry and Meghan, willing the feeble light around them not to go out. It resonated through his shoulder bones and making them buzz, then moving up into his ears, coming from Luna's half-closed lips, a simple little tune about gifts.

Experimentally, he joined in, humming with her. A moment later, so did Ginny, and then Neville, and then Ron and Hermione were humming along as well, still quiet but slowly gaining strength.

At the chorus, Draco began to sing the words, about how when everything was simple, no one would have to be ashamed of anything, that everyone would have the time and the abilities to bring themselves right. When the song ended, they began it again, and this time Hermione and Draco sang a harmony line under the main melody. A third time, and Ron provided a counterpoint melody with different words, which made the rhythms different.

Meghan's head came up. "I hear singing!"

"So do I!" Harry's spirits lifted. "This way! They're calling us!"

Arm in arm, supporting each other, they ran down the center corridor. Sirius joined the song an instant after Aletha. Remus, sitting beside Danger, was singing too, and the light around Harry and Meghan was brightening, as if in response. The doors of the hospital wing opened, and Professor Dumbledore entered, smiling, with Fawkes the phoenix on his shoulder – and Fawkes was singing too, singing along with them, and his song and the bright azure light around Harry and Meghan brought real hope into Sirius' heart for the first time since

he'd seen Harry's face on that bench. Maybe everything could still be all right...

As if by common consent, the song ceased. In the sudden silence, Meghan's sigh was clearly audible as she slumped from her long-held pose.

Sirius started forward, but Neville was quicker, vaulting off the bed where all the Pride was sitting and catching Meghan before she hit the floor, holding her gently against him. Sirius hurried to them and held out his arms. "Give her to me," he said, trying not to make it sound like an order, but knowing he was probably failing, and why not? He was perfectly qualified to give orders where Meghan was concerned – he was her father, for Merlin's sake!

And why am I getting so worked up about this? asked a small corner of his mind.

Neville looked down at Meghan's relaxed face, and a sudden flash came to Sirius that this wouldn't be the last time this tableau would occur, but that next time, the roles would be reversed...

Great, now I'm turning into a Seer? This is all we need.

Neville relinquished his hold on Meghan, and Sirius got carefully to his feet, holding her in his arms, noticing the faint smile on her face.

Good God – I forgot about Harry!

He wanted to kick himself. How could he have forgotten about Harry?

But as he turned back to his godson's bedside, he saw that his concern was unnecessary. Harry still breathed, and his breathing sounded easier than it had. The unnatural paleness in his face was gone. Aletha was standing beside him, holding his hand in hers, a smile beginning to line her brow as it did Meghan's. She clearly thought everything was going to be all right.

Madam Pomfrey had been hovering in the background, unwilling to disturb whatever was going on, but now she hurried forward to run

her diagnostic spells, and Sirius noticed Aletha's eyes following the movements of the wand, and her lips moving as Madam Pomfrey muttered words.

"Well, I don't understand it," she said finally, looking as baffled as she sounded, "but he's going to be all right. It's as if that fall never happened. He's still got the concussion from the Bludger, and various bumps and scrapes, but other than that, he's perfectly all right."

Sirius looked at the child in his arms in awe. Did she...

But how?

He laid her gently on the bed next to Harry's and looked up at Dumbledore as the Headmaster came to stand on the other side of the bed. "Do you know?" he asked. Aletha was standing beside him now, and Remus had come over as well, and Sirius could hear cautious footsteps behind him as the rest of the Pride tried to get closer to listen.

Dumbledore smiled and leaned down to stroke Meghan's forehead.

"Welcome home, eagle's daughter," he said. "Meghan Lily Black, blood Heir of Ravenclaw."

(A/N: And you can't say I haven't been hinting at it, because I bloody well HAVE!

So. The death threats, and the yelling, were not necessary, were they? (Although I did enjoy them.) I'll be posting responses on the Yahoo group soon, I hope, for both chapters. And if you want to see a response, you know what you have to do...

"DO IT, ROCKAPELLA!"

Ooo-kay... :cough: Slight flashback to childhood there. Sorry. Anyway, please review!)

Chapter 28: Memories and Magic

"No," said Aletha, shaking her head. "No. That can't be right."

"I assure you, it is." Dumbledore was still looking at Meghan, lying limply on the bed. "Only a blood Heir of the Founders would be able to use the magic of Hogwarts as directly as Meghan did just now. And only the Heir of Ravenclaw could have used that magic to heal."

"One of you must be an Heir as well, then," said Remus to Sirius and Aletha. "There's no other way Meghan could be."

Sirius and Aletha looked at each other strangely, as if both reassessing the person they'd thought they knew. Remus left them to it and turned around, startling Neville into a backwards leap which almost landed him on Luna's toes. She was looking past Remus at the bed where Meghan was lying. "Is Meghan really a blood Heir?" she asked Remus.

"Professor Dumbledore says she is," said Remus. "I trust him."

"All right." Luna went to join the rest of the Pride, all gathered around Harry's bed, staring at him. Remus smiled at the thought of what Harry would say if he woke up at this moment. He hated being stared at, for any reason, only slightly more than he hated lying in bed during the day, when there were things to do and places to go.

"Is Meghan going to be all right?" asked Neville.

Remus brought his attention back to the boy. He sometimes wished Augusta would realize that her grandson wasn't her son and stop comparing the two. It only made Neville more uncomfortable with his own abilities, which were not inconsiderable, Remus suspected, if he were a little more confident. Meghan was very good for him in that regard, refusing to believe him when he became self-deprecatory.

That might be a good match someday. And I think Sirius is finally waking up to that fact.

"I think she will be," he said, recalling that Neville had asked him a question. "She used a lot of magic and tired herself out, that's all."

"She saved Harry's life," said Neville in awe, turning to look at his friend, or what could be seen of him through the rest of the Pride. "Didn't she?"

Why don't I deal with this now, before it goes any farther...

"Listen to me, please, everyone," he said quietly to the Pride, moving between them until he was standing by the head of Harry's bed. "If anyone asks you what happened, I want you to tell them that Madam Pomfrey was mistaken at first. She misread the diagnostic spell and thought Harry was more badly injured than he actually was. Meghan insisted that she try the spell again, and when she did, she realized her mistake and had Sirius bring Harry to the castle so she could treat him."

"You don't want anyone to know about Meghan," said Hermione.

"Exactly."

Hermione turned and faced the rest of the Pride. "This is a den-secret," she said. "Like the Stone was last year. No one who's not Pride or Pack can know about it. Does everyone understand?"

Heads nodded throughout the group.

My little Kitten, alpha female. What a girl. "Go and get some lunch, then," said Remus, as a pang of hunger made him check his watch and discover that it was nearly one o'clock. "We'll let you know when they wake up."

"Thank you, sir," said Ron, and gently pulled Ginny away from Harry. "He's not going anywhere now," Remus heard him say as they left, the rest of the Pride trailing them.

Draco lingered for a moment, looking at Remus a little wistfully, and after a moment or two Remus figured out what he wanted.

“Good work today,” he said, shaking Draco's hand first, then pulling him into a hug. “Flying under less than perfect conditions, and your first time, you still scored.”

“Thanks.” Draco smiled slightly. “Good thing thunder doesn't scare me so much any more.”

“Yes. A good thing.” Remus knew exactly what his Pack-son was referring to. It had happened very shortly after he had come to live with the Pack...

Remus shut the bathroom door and was about to get back into bed with Danger when he stopped. Something wasn't quite right.

A huge thunderstorm was happening outside, of course, but that wasn't it. It was something indoors, something nearby, a sound, or a scent, that shouldn't be present.

A scent. That was it. He closed his eyes and thought about other things. The melodies from some of his favorite operas... what would likely be for breakfast in the morning... how Vilius would do as Minister of Magic...

Distress, unhappiness, fear, worry, all were part of this scent, the back of his mind told him. And it was coming from very nearby. Just down the hall.

A flash of lightning, a crack of thunder, and the scent intensified briefly.

Afraid of the storm? That has to be one of the little ones.

He walked quietly down the hallway, listening to the rain pound on the roof.

We haven't had a big one like this in a while.

The door to the cubs' room, as always at night, was open, so that someone would hear them if they cried out. The scent was very definitely coming from inside.

Remus looked around the door, just as another flash of lightning lit the room brightly for an instant, long enough for him to see Draco huddled in the middle of the bed, shivering, arms wrapped around his knees. Harry and Hermione were asleep on either side of him, seemingly unaware of the wrath of nature just outside their window.

Draco's head turned towards Remus, and the fear smell intensified again.

He's afraid of me? Damn it, his father would probably have "disciplined" him for being so childish as to be frightened of the storm. And never mind that he is a child, and a very little one still, and can't possibly be expected to face his fears without any kind of help...

But Lucius Malfoy was getting what he deserved, and it was high time Draco got the same.

"Did the storm wake you?" he asked quietly.

A small nod.

"Let's go downstairs. So we don't wake anyone else up." It was only after he'd said it that Remus realized Draco might take this the wrong way, that he might think Remus meant to hurt him somehow and didn't want him to wake the others by crying out. And that's the last thing I want to do, but how can I tell him that?

But Draco slid off the bed and came to him, and held his hand as they walked down the stairs together, stopping for a moment every time the thunder crashed outside. Remus sat down on the living room couch when they got to the main floor, and Draco curled up at the opposite end, looking apprehensive.

"Does the noise scare you?"

Draco nodded. "What makes it?" he ventured quietly.

"The lightning makes the air hot and pushes it apart. Then it cools down and comes back together, like this." Remus brought his hands

together. "You might say it's the clouds clapping their hands, because they like the show the lightning is putting on."

Draco gave a timid smile, which vanished as a loud clap of thunder sounded just outside. "It's loud," he said. "And it sounds angry."

"Yes, it does, but it can't come inside. We're safe here."

You're safe here.

On impulse, Remus patted the place beside him, invitingly.

Draco looked indecisive for a moment, then scrambled quickly across the couch and curled up against Remus' side. Remus put an arm around the little boy, willing calm and peace into him.

You're safe here. No one will hurt you or frighten you again. Thunderstorms are the worst thing you'll ever have to face.

He wished he could be sure it would always be true. Even over just the past few days, he had come to care for this child with a passion that startled him, though it shouldn't have. Something similar had happened when Meghan was born, and when he'd met Hermione, and even at Harry's birth, though he hadn't known then that he would someday be responsible for James Potter's son.

Much less Lucius Malfoy's. But that's over. He's ours now.

He's mine.

Harry belongs especially to Sirius. Draco can be especially mine.

If he wants to.

A weight on his lap made him glance down. Draco was in the process of taking possession of it. Remus looked away quickly, knowing that the boy would take any action on his part as a denial, and not wanting Draco to see the smile on his face.

It does look like he wants to.

He slid his arms around Draco when the boy was situated, and they waited out the storm together.

"Would you like to hear a story?" Remus asked when the thunder was almost completely gone.

"M too big for stories," said Draco sleepily.

"You're never too old for a bedtime story. Do you know the story of Cinderella?"

A little nod.

"Would you like to hear it?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, once upon a time there was a lovely witch named Ella, who had a wicked stepmother and two ugly stepsisters. They took away her wand and made her do all the housework without magic, and sleep near the kitchen fireplace so that she got covered in ashes and cinders, and that's how she came to be called Cinderella..."

Draco fell asleep as the prince took the Shrinking Charms off the ugly stepsisters' feet. Remus carried him upstairs while Cinderella's magical shoes transfigured her dirty clothes into her beautiful ball gown, and tucked him in between the other cubs during the wedding.

"And they all lived happily ever after," he finished in a whisper, stroking Draco's fine, pale hair.

And so will you. I swear, if it takes everything I have, even my life, I will find you a happily ever after. And that goes for everyone.

Remus closed his eyes, thinking of his Pack, the people he loved more than anything else in the world. Somehow, I will find us a happy ending. I have no idea how, or when, or what will happen in between. But I promise you all that there will be a happily ever after for us.

“So I speak,” he murmured. “So I intend. And so let it be done.”

He returned to bed feeling as if he'd done something important, but not really knowing what.

“Can we have lunch together?” Draco asked a little hesitantly as Remus returned to the present. “There's something I want to ask you.”

“Of course.” Remus laid a quick scent-touch on both Harry and Meghan, then left the hospital wing with Draco, leading the way to a room where he knew they wouldn't be disturbed.

In the staffroom, Aletha regained her composure with the help of a large cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches.

Everything looks better after lunch.

Sirius, she noticed with a secret smile, was beginning to look more and more rattled, as what Dumbledore had told them began to sink in.

It's our pattern. One of us reacts right away, and the other takes care of them until they get their head on straight. Then the calm one flips out, and it's the other one's turn to take care of everything.

It was part of the reason they made such a good team. But now, one of them was something they'd never expected.

What happens now?

“What happens now?” asked Sirius, echoing her thoughts exactly. “I mean, is there any way to figure out which of us is the Heir?”

“I doubt any simple test exists,” said Dumbledore, brushing crumbs from his beard. “There are factors in both your favors – you come from a very old pureblood family, Sirius. How far back is your genealogy charted, would you happen to know?”

“At least to the Middle Ages, possibly earlier. But if there is Ravenclaw blood in the family, no one knows about it, or Mother would have trumpeted it to the skies. She would have been so proud of being descended from a Founder.”

"If it was your mother," said Aletha. "It's just as possible it was your father."

"Then she would have been proud of marrying into the family of a Founder. She was proud of it anyway – I think she was prouder of the Black name than Father was." Sirius shook his head. "She was a strange old bird."

"Can you recall if she, or any other member of your family, showed unusual talent for healing?" asked Dumbledore.

"Just Andy, as far as I know. And we're related on my father's side anyway, so it wouldn't have anything to do with Mother. But that would mean Bellatrix would be an Heir as well, and Dora, and even Draco, if that's where it comes from. And none of them have ever shown any interest in healing. Especially not Bellatrix." Sirius snorted. "Just about the opposite."

"And neither have you," said Dumbledore. "So that is a factor against you, and one for Aletha, with a documented interest in pursuing Healing as a career." His eyes were not accusing, for which Aletha was highly grateful. After a rattling morning, and having just the past year come to terms with the reason she had left her apprenticeship as a Healer halfway through, she was not eager to reopen the matter at the moment.

"My mother did rehabilitation," she volunteered. "She worked with injured animals. Injured birds, mostly. Taking care of them, either getting them fit to return to the wild, or caring for them if they couldn't. She loved her work."

"And your mother was English," said Dumbledore, in a tone of getting his facts straight. "Your father American."

"Yes, and both Muggles – though Dad had a witch for a sister and never knew it. But you don't honestly think I could be an Heir, do you? Except for me and Aunt Amy, my family's Muggle to the nth degree."

“Ravenclaw had that one daughter who was a Squib,” said Sirius. “You could be descended from her.”

“How would a magical ability come down through a Squib’s bloodline?” demanded Aletha. “No, it has to be you, Sirius. She has to get it from you.”

“If she does, why don’t I have it?”

Dumbledore had been quietly turning the pages of a large book he had brought down from the library. “If I may,” he said at this point, turning the book around. “Sirius, is this correct?”

Sirius looked at the page. “I don’t even want to know where you got that,” he said, “but yes, it looks right.” It was a copy of the Black family tree. It was woven into a magical tapestry at their family home in London, Aletha knew, though she hadn’t seen it during their short stay there, and she had no desire to return. She hadn’t cared for Kreacher at all, and she had a feeling it was mutual.

“If I am reading it correctly, your mother had only one sibling, a brother.”

“That’s right. Uncle Alphard. He liked me, left me some gold, and Mum blasted him off the tapestry for it.”

“He had no children?”

“None. Never even married.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Making you, and Meghan, the only living scions of that particular line.”

“That’s right.”

“It is entirely possible that the Ravenclaw power manifests only in female descendants of the line,” said Dumbledore, closing the book. “That would account for your apparent lack of power, and Meghan’s quite obvious possession of it.”

“But that would mean my mum had it!” Sirius looked half appalled and half highly amused. “She never healed anything in her life! Even her houseplants died!”

“It is also possible for a power to be blocked, or even subverted.” Dumbledore set the book aside and took a sip of his tea. “Either consciously or subconsciously, by the power’s wielder or another. If, as you say, her plants often died, she may indeed have had the power to heal, but have warped it with her wishes and beliefs into the opposite.”

“Medicine in one dose is poison in another,” said Aletha, recalling the most basic lessons of Healing. “That which can heal can also harm.”

“Precisely.”

“So you think it’s me, then,” said Sirius. “Through my mum’s side. But I’ll never have it, because it only comes out in women?”

“It seems plausible,” said Dumbledore. “We could, of course, be entirely wrong.”

“We could always be entirely wrong,” said Aletha. “There could be no such thing as magic, in which case none of this matters at all. This seems like the most likely answer. Shall we leave it at that, then, and talk about something else?”

“Like what?” asked Sirius.

“Like what we’re going to do now. Poppy said Harry was dying, and I don’t think she made any mistake. So Meghan literally pulled him back from death. That’s a big thing for a little girl to do. How are we going to keep her from puffing herself off?”

“The natural consequences of her actions may help with that,” said Dumbledore. “Do you recall the tales of Rowena Ravenclaw, and what would happen to her after she used her healing abilities?”

“She was tired afterwards,” said Sirius. “Sometimes she’d be in bed for days, or weeks – I think she was bedridden for a couple of months after one time, when she healed a whole bunch of people.”

“And she was a full-grown witch.” Aletha felt a little dizzy at the mere thought. “Pearl’s just a baby.”

“But she had a resource Rowena did not,” said Dumbledore. “Hogwarts was still young then, and had not had time to become the reservoir of magical power it now is. I have learned, over many years at Hogwarts, to sense the magic which has collected in and around the school, although I cannot command it. Meghan can do so, and did today. It is a formidable resource.”

“So, could any Heir of the Founders use the magic of Hogwarts?” asked Aletha, having suddenly had a truly awful thought.

“Only one who had a legitimate reason to be here,” said Dumbledore, meeting her eyes. “No invader could take the school’s magic by force.”

“You’re thinking of Voldemort, aren’t you,” said Sirius. “Heir of Slytherin and all that.”

“Yes.” Aletha shivered. “He was powerful enough before, thank you very much. If he had access to the kind of power that allowed a nine-year-old to save her brother’s life and not kill herself in the process...”

“My reasoning precisely,” said Dumbledore softly. “And this is part of what makes the opening of the Chamber of Secrets so disturbing. If there is another Heir of Slytherin, one with a genuine tie to the school – a student, or a member of the faculty – that person could indeed be using the power of Hogwarts. That power might have been what killed Harry’s snake.”

Sirius glowered. “That’s wrong,” he said. “That’s just wrong. This school was built to shelter, to protect, not to kill. It’s like taking a good guard dog and turning it into an attack animal.”

The three sat in silence for a long moment.

"We have papers to grade," said Aletha finally, standing up. "And cubs to check on. Even though I doubt they'll be awake any time in the near future."

"Depends on what you mean by 'near'," said Sirius, also standing. "Probably not until at least tomorrow, though."

"Still, we should be findable if we're needed."

Dumbledore smiled. "You, Aletha, are never hard to find."

"Thank you, Albus. I think."

Sirius chuckled. "She never could take a compliment." He ducked out the door ahead of Aletha's swat. "And she always had a good backhand," he added, popping his head back in the door for one moment.

Aletha's second swing didn't miss.

"Good forehand, too," Sirius mumbled, holding his hand against a rapidly swelling lip.

Dumbledore shook his head regretfully. "Professors brawling in the staffroom," he said. "The Heirs of the Founders returning. What is this school coming to?"

"You don't think I'm bad, then?" asked Draco for probably the fourth time.

Is he allowed to have adolescent anxieties when he's not even thirteen yet? Remus resisted the urge to rub his temples. Draco had always been very sensitive to signs of other people's distress, and worse, he always interpreted them as something he'd done wrong. "No, I do not think you're bad. Being angry doesn't make you bad. It makes you a twelve-year-old boy with the normal emotions of one. Ron was just as angry, and he's not wondering if he's bad."

Draco looked at the floor. "Ron's family weren't all Slytherins until him, either," he said. "And he was angry differently. He was all hot. I was

more cold. And I thought really awful things – like I wanted to hurt one of Ron's brothers, to make him understand how I felt. I didn't know I could be mean like that."

"Draco, everyone has parts of himself he'd rather not face," said Remus patiently. "Remember last year, when Harry shot his mouth off in Defense, and then tried to hurt you and Hermione when you called him on it?"

Draco nodded.

"If that was all you knew about Harry, what kind of person would you think he was?"

"Violent," said Draco after thinking for a moment. "Uncontrolled and mean."

"Is he really that way?"

"No. That was just a few minutes out of his whole life. He's almost never like that."

"And that was just a few minutes out of your whole life, out on the Quidditch pitch." Remus hoped he was getting through. "Yes, you have the ability to be cruel and want revenge. So do all human beings. The trick is knowing that, and training yourself not to act on every whim. You've been in training for that since you were four, and you still are. Do you remember what we used to call you?"

"Warriors?"

"That's right. I think we should pick that up again. Consider yourself, and the whole Pride, as warriors in training. Here at school, and at home, you're going to learn the skills you'll need in war."

"Is there going to be a war, then?" asked Draco.

Remus sighed. "I don't see any way to avoid it, fox. Voldemort's still out there – we found that out last year – and he still wants to come back. And if – no, not if – when he does, there will be another war."

Draco lifted his chin. "I'll be ready," he said. "We all will."

No, you won't. No one ever is.

But Remus saw no reason to shake Draco's bold resolve today. Life would do that for him all too soon.

And they may not be ready, but they will be more ready.

We'll make sure of that.

Neville couldn't sleep. He was very tired, since he'd spent the afternoon answering questions from what seemed like most of Gryffindor House, but couldn't have been, since there were equal crowds around his Pridemates.

Yes, Harry Potter was alive. No, he hadn't been dying, Madam Pomfrey had made a mistake. Yes, Meghan Black was all right. She'd fainted from relief when she'd found out Harry wasn't dying (that was his own invention, quickly come up with when the question had arisen, and the rest of the Pride had seized on it). Yes, Harry really had caught the Snitch, Gryffindor hadn't just been awarded the win. No, he didn't think Dudley Dursley was the Heir of Slytherin (this from a small and very excitable-looking first year boy clutching a camera).

Now, Neville asked himself a question.

Would Harry and Meghan want a visitor in the middle of the night?

They'd probably be asleep. Harry had been badly hurt, and people who were hurt usually slept a lot afterwards. And Meghan had worn herself out using a lot of magic. But if they were asleep, there wouldn't be any harm in his just going to look at them, would there?

If he was caught, of course, he'd be in trouble...

So I won't get caught.

He was getting up already, fitting his feet into his slippers and putting on his dressing gown. He would slip down to the hospital wing, have

a look at them both, make sure they were still all right, and come back. No one would ever know he'd been gone.

"You shouldn't be out of bed at this hour," said the Fat Lady reprovingly as he climbed out of the portrait hole.

"I'll be right back," said Neville. "I, er, forgot my Charms text in the classroom."

"Well, all right."

He crept carefully down the staircases, stepping over the vanishing step in the center of one, watching where he was going so as not to run into any suits of armor. One floor away from his destination, he backed hastily into a dark corner as Peeves came zooming along the corridor, reclining on what looked like a magic carpet, but Neville didn't think carpets came in tartan. Nor that they had sleeves.

"Give that back!" shouted a furious voice.

Professor McGonagall – oh no –

Neville shrank into the corner even farther. I'm not here, he thought frantically, willing the darkness to hide him. I'm not here – you can't see me – you don't notice me – I'm not here...

"Peeves, return my dressing gown at ONCE!" Professor McGonagall, in her nightdress, came stalking along the hallway, looking quite put out. Peeves bobbed up and down in midair, just out of her reach, wrapped in the dressing gown and whistling. Whatever song it was, McGonagall obviously didn't care for it, since she whipped out her wand and shouted "Rubellosis!"

Large red spots popped up all over Peeves. He screeched and dropped the gown to scratch at them furiously, and Professor McGonagall caught it as it fell. "Are you going to pester me again tonight?" she asked, putting it on.

"No, ma'am, your Professorship, ma'am," said Peeves, scratching all over and looking as penitent as he ever did.

“Innocus,” said McGonagall, and the spots disappeared. Peeves did the same, and McGonagall turned and walked away.

It worked – I don’t believe it! It worked! She didn’t see me! Neville did an entirely internal dance of joy, then cautiously followed McGonagall down the hall, being sure to keep a corner between them at all times.

As he lurked at the top of the last staircase he had to go down, he heard a sudden gasp and an ejaculation of “Merciful heavens!”

“Minerva?”

Oh no – Professor Dumbledore too?

Neville gulped as the Headmaster appeared out of the darkness in the very corridor he was in – he was in plain sight, there was no time to hide, he’d be spotted for sure –

But Dumbledore’s eyes passed right over him, as if he were nothing more than another suit of armor, and landed on something partway down the stairs. “What on earth...”

“I don’t know,” said Professor McGonagall, sounding shaken. “I found him like this, just a moment or two ago...”

Dumbledore disappeared from Neville’s view, down the stairs. “The hospital wing, I think,” Neville heard him say, and chanced a peek just in time to see McGonagall vanish around the corner at the bottom of the stairs, carrying something that looked like the feet of a statue.

What’s going on?

Neville made his cautious way down the stairs, ending up outside the open door of the hospital wing, looking in. Meghan lay in her bed, Harry in his, neither moving. Four adults were grouped around another bed, whose occupant was entirely blocked from Neville’s sight.

“Petrified,” said Madam Pomfrey, grimly. “That’s the only thing that looks like this – he’s been Petrified. Where was he?”

“On the stairs just a little ways from here,” said Professor McGonagall. “There were grapes lying beside him, I have no idea why...”

“Probably trying to sneak in and visit Harry,” said Professor Freeman-Black. “He hero-worships him, always saying hello in the hallways, trying to get him to sign a picture.”

“Yes, a picture,” said Professor McGonagall, moving over so that Neville could see who was in the bed.

That little first year! What’s his name – Creevey, Colin Creevey!

“Might he have taken a picture of his attacker?” continued Professor McGonagall, handing something to Professor Dumbledore. It was the camera Colin carried everywhere, Neville saw, as McGonagall stepped out of the way.

“It is worth a look.” Professor Dumbledore opened the back of the camera.

A jet of steam hissed out, and Neville gagged a little at the smell of burnt plastic.

“I guess not,” said Professor Freeman-Black, looking slightly ill herself. “What could melt a camera like that?”

“The same force that could Petrify a child,” said Professor Dumbledore, setting the camera down. “I can draw only one conclusion. The Chamber of Secrets has indeed been opened once more.”

Professor Freeman-Black swore under her breath. Madam Pomfrey’s hand was over her mouth. Professor McGonagall was staring at Dumbledore.

“But, then, Albus... who...”

"I do not know." Dumbledore was frowning. "But there is another aspect to this that troubles me greatly. A few moments ago, just before I discovered you and this young man, Minerva, I felt the magic of the school being tapped once more."

"But Meghan can't have done anything," said Professor Freeman-Black. "She's been asleep for hours, probably will be for a week. It has to have been someone else."

"Precisely. And if you recall what we discussed earlier, about who can and cannot use the power of Hogwarts..."

"Heirs of the Founders, with a valid reason to be here," said Professor Freeman-Black slowly. "So you think..."

"That another Heir of Slytherin may exist," said Dumbledore gravely. "And one who has a current tie to Hogwarts."

Professor Freeman-Black sat down on the bed behind her. "That," she said, "would be very bad." Her eyes traveled from Colin's frozen face up to the wall behind him, across to the door, and landed on Neville.

If you think you've been seen when you're sneaking around, keep doing whatever you were doing, said Hermione's voice in his mind. If you were moving, keep moving, if you were holding still, keep holding still. Don't react or try to run away unless you're sure you've been seen.

Neville had been standing still. He remained frozen in position. I'm not here, he chanted in his head. I'm not here, you can't see me...

Professor Freeman-Black blinked and rubbed her eyes. Neville used the moment to nip out of sight.

"Aletha, is something wrong?" asked Madam Pomfrey's voice.

"No, nothing. I'm overtired, seeing things."

Neville edged along the corridor and up the stairs, then started running. The sooner he was back in Gryffindor Tower, the better.

He had a lot to think about.

“Another Heir of Slytherin?” repeated Ron.

“That means they must already know who one is,” said Draco.

“So Siss was killed, and Colin Petrified,” said Hermione. “I wonder why Colin didn’t get killed too?”

“I’m glad he didn’t,” said Ginny. “He’s annoying, but I wouldn’t want him dead.”

“Is there any way to get un-Petrified?” asked Ron.

“Mandrakes,” said Hermione, Luna, and Neville all at the same time, making the rest of the Pride laugh. They were sitting outdoors after lunch, enjoying the weekend, the fair weather that had come in the wake of yesterday’s rain, and the fact that no one was dead.

“What’s all this about?” Percy Weasley, looking very disapproving, swept down on them.

“We’re talking,” said Ron, looking strangely at his brother. “What’s wrong with that?”

“You shouldn’t be out here, unsupervised. Not with people getting Petrified, and animals getting killed – both the school roosters were killed this term, not to mention that snake of Harry’s, and now the Creevey boy – you should be indoors.”

“Percy, the last time I checked, Colin and Siss were both inside when they were attacked,” said Ginny. “What makes you think inside is any safer than out?”

“Inside, you can be watched,” Percy said patiently, as if Ginny were three. “By qualified witches and wizards, and prefects. They can make certain nothing bad happens to you. I don’t want to see you wandering around the grounds again. Is that clear?”

“We’re not wandering around,” said Draco. “We’re just sitting here. And there’s a teacher right over there.” He pointed across the courtyard at Professor Black, who was lounging on another stone seat, scribbling on some pieces of parchment and comparing them one to another. “Two teachers, actually,” he corrected himself as Madam Hooch came into the courtyard. “So why should we go inside again?”

Percy scowled and walked away.

“He’s even worse than usual lately,” said Ron. “Wonder what’s up.”

“He probably takes it as a personal insult that it was a Gryffindor snake and a Gryffindor student who got attacked,” said Ginny, stretching her legs out. “So what’s this about Mandrakes?”

“Well,” said Hermione, “I know Professor Sprout has Mandrakes growing, because we repotted them in class, and I know they have to be mature before you can prepare them, but I don’t know how long that’s going to take...”

“About nine or ten months, I think,” said Neville, trying to recall what he’d read about Mandrakes in their Herbology book. “They start out looking like babies, and grow up little by little – when they look like adults, they’re ready to be used.”

Hermione launched into a long explanation of how Mandrakes were made into the potion called Mandragora, with Draco and Luna correcting her along the way. Neville tuned out, watching Madam Hooch talking to Professor Black instead. He was only interested in plants as long as they were alive.

“Sirius!”

He looked up. So did everyone else.

Professor Freeman-Black was leaning out of a window, two stories up. “He’s awake!” she called down.

Professor Black said something to Madam Hooch, crammed his parchment scraps and quill into his bag, and started inside at a run. The Pride wasn't far behind.

"He" could only be Harry.

Harry was a bit confused. He remembered running with Meghan down a long stone corridor, following the sound of his friends' voices singing, calling him back...

How he had gotten from that corridor to this bed, he had no idea. He knew where he was, of course – the hospital wing – but he had absolutely no recollection of anything between running with Meghan, each of them supporting the other, and lying here with Madam Pomfrey fussing over him.

"You look as well as can be expected," she said finally. "How do you feel?"

"All right, I guess," said Harry. "Tired, and kind of achy. Is Meghan all right?"

"Still asleep," said Madam Pomfrey, moving aside so that Harry could see Meghan, tucked into a bed near his. "And likely to be for quite a while. That was powerful magic she used. But I'm sure your family will tell you all about that."

Letha entered the hospital wing and crossed to Harry's bed, smiling at him. "Is it all right for him to sit up, Poppy?" she asked Madam Pomfrey.

"It should be. But if you start to feel dizzy, lie back down," Madam Pomfrey cautioned Harry. "And have a drink of water."

Harry carefully raised himself to sitting, Letha supporting him. Once he was up and propped by pillows, she poured him a glass of water, then gave him a gentle hug after he was done drinking. "You gave us a good scare, Greeneyes," she said. "It seems to be your stock in trade. And I should warn you, Poppy, you're about to be invaded."

“What else is new,” said Madam Pomfrey with a sigh. “Try to keep it down to a dull roar, please.” She went into her office and shut the door.

“Who’s there?” asked Harry, pointing at a screened-off bed in the corner.

“That’s part of what we have to tell you about,” said Letha, looking sober, as Padfoot pelted through the door, wearing a huge smile and closely trailed by Ron and Draco, with the rest of the Pride in hot pursuit. “But in a few minutes.”

Those few minutes later, Harry was feeling dizzy, though not from sitting up.

Why does everything interesting happen when I’m asleep?

He had told his story, about Siss and Meghan, in return for the Pride and Padfoot and Letha telling him what had been happening at Hogwarts. He thought their story was much more interesting, but they all seemed more interested in his.

“Meghan shut the door you wanted to go through?” repeated Padfoot.

Harry nodded, carefully. “And then she asked me to dance with her, and when I did, I remembered things about my life, and that I didn’t want to go through the door – I wanted to go back with her and be alive again.”

“What kinds of things?” asked Draco.

“All kinds. Like where I lived, and the Pack and everyone, and what happened to me. Did I get hit with a Bludger?”

Padfoot nodded. “And Madam Hooch told me something very interesting,” he said. “The bat the Dursley boy used was hexed.”

“Hexed?” repeated Letha.

“With a certain charm you might remember. The one that turns a wooden Bludger temporarily into iron.”

"Well, that would certainly explain a lot," said Letha after a moment of shocked silence. "What does he have to say for himself?"

"According to Rolanda, he claims he doesn't know how it got that way. And I don't think a mediocre second year student could have performed that hex. And you're not to repeat that," Padfoot added, looking at the Pride.

"None of this," said Letha, making a zipper motion over her lips. "Den-secret, all of it."

Two or three of the Pride looked to Harry, who nodded.

"So you got hit with an iron Bludger," said Draco. "That would explain why you fell. We've only ever played with the wooden ones."

"And you got hurt," said Luna. "But Meghan saved you, after your snake friend made you stay alive."

"And now Meghan's asleep." Harry looked over at her again. "Do we know how long it'll be before she wakes up?"

"No idea," said Letha. "And she'll probably be quite weak for a while after she's awake. She might not fully recover for a month or two."

"Better than Colin," said Ginny, looking towards the corner with the screened-off bed. "He won't be awake until the Mandrakes are full-grown, and that's not likely to be until spring or even summer. He's going to miss most of his first year. Probably have to take special lessons to make up for it."

"He's lucky he wasn't killed," said Harry quietly, thinking of Siss.

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

Madam Pomfrey permitted Harry to leave the hospital wing the next day, and his life went back to something resembling normal. He discovered, now that Colin was no longer saying hello to him every time classes changed, that he'd gotten used to it, and actually missed it now.

Ginny hexed Fred on Thursday, after the fourth time in a day that he or George had leapt out at her from behind a statue, snarling loudly and covered in boils or sporting fangs. The combination of her beautifully performed Bat-Bogey Hex and Percy's threat to write home to Mrs. Weasley convinced the twins to stop trying to scare her.

Meghan awoke for a short while on Saturday, longer on Sunday, and was pronounced on the road to recovery on Tuesday, though she wasn't allowed to leave the hospital wing yet.

"But I wanna go back to the dorm," she complained.

"Pearl, you can't even sit up on your own yet," said Padfoot, who was holding her upright in the bed. "Or eat, or get to the bathroom. You're better off here."

"And when you do move, you're coming to our quarters, where we can keep an eye on you," said Letha, scooping up a spoonful of applesauce. "Open."

Meghan rolled her eyes but opened her mouth. Letha inserted the spoon, and Meghan promptly clamped her teeth down on it.

Harry turned his head away, fighting his urge to laugh. If he laughed, Letha would be angry with him for encouraging Meghan. But it was so funny to see Meghan playing the same tricks now that she had when she was a baby...

Padfoot snickered. There was the sound of a smack. "Don't you start," said Letha.

"Ow."

Harry turned back just in time to see Meghan giggle and spray applesauce across the bedspread. He smiled to himself.

Everything was going to be fine.
(A/N: Overconfident much, Harry?)

So, one more week of work, and then two blissful weeks of vacation... when I have absolutely nothing to do... :D Please send review love to encourage me to update lots during those two weeks, because after that school starts again, and I'll be busy, busy, busy... gack.)

Chapter 29: Warriors

The remaining weeks of term were uneventful, unless one counted Meghan's antics in the hospital wing. It was a good thing she didn't get sick often, Sirius thought, because she was an atrocious patient. She hated having to stay in bed, and made her displeasure known partly by being extremely picky about everything. Aletha'd had to calm down the house elves one morning after Meghan had sent her breakfast tray back five times, and there were nights both of them spent an hour getting her settled down to go to sleep.

The other manifestation of Meghan's bad temper was tantrums, which began to emerge about halfway through December, when she had enough energy to sustain them. The most extreme of these, the day before she was scheduled to leave the hospital wing, involved flinging herself around in bed, throwing things across the room, and screaming, "I don't want to! I won't! I won't! You can't make me!"

Sirius removed all the breakables from her reach, stood out of easy throwing range, and let her scream. She's not rational right now, and trying to talk to her will only make her worse. I knew something was going to set her off, just not what.

But of all things, telling her we're going to Floo home for Christmas rather than take the train...

"I will go on the train, I will!" screamed Meghan, thrashing around in bed. "I want to, I want to, I want to..."

"Is this a bad time?" said a voice from the door.

"Neville!" Meghan was suddenly all smiles. "Dadfoot – I mean Professor Black – can Neville please come in? May he?"

"Of course." Sirius nodded to the boy, who came inside, holding something behind his back. Flowers, Sirius was sure. Neville must have some secret source of flowers, because Pomona Sprout said she wasn't missing any from the greenhouses, and it was the middle of winter, yet the vase by Meghan's bed was always full, courtesy of Neville.

“Oh, a Christmas bouquet!” Meghan exclaimed as Neville displayed today’s offering. “Holly and ivy – they’re so pretty...”

Contrary to popular opinion, Sirius could, sometimes, figure out when his presence was not required. This was one of those times.

“I’m glad you like them.” Neville sat on the edge of Meghan’s bed and handed her the bouquet, or whatever one called it if it was made of greenery instead of flowers, Sirius thought. “I would have brought you a poinsettia, but it’s not ready yet.”

“That’s all right. I like these better anyway. What’s this plant with the white berries? I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

Sirius turned the corner, cutting off Neville’s reply.

I think I’ll see if Letha’s busy.

We need to talk.

“About what?” asked his wife, looking up from the essays she was grading (he’d done his share that morning).

“Meghan and Neville.”

“What about them?”

“Well... she’s acting awfully strangely towards him.”

“Strangely?”

“They’re very friendly.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, but it seems to be getting into a direction where it’s more than just friendly.”

“You mean they’re good friends?”

Sirius was about to get angry with her for being so obtuse when he realized she was having him on. Instead of trying to be more specific – she knew perfectly well what he was talking about – he tried a different tack. “How long have you known?”

“Known what?”

I love the woman, but she knows where every single one of my buttons is, and takes pleasure in pushing them... “How long have you known that Meghan and Neville were interested in each other?”

“Interested in what way?”

“Damn it, Aletha, this isn’t funny!”

“It’s not?” Aletha shook her head, smiling. “Never mind. I’ll stop. So you’ve finally noticed that our little girl is growing up, have you?”

“Finally? How long have you known?”

“I’ve known, for sure, since last summer. I suspected when I saw the letters she was getting from him last year, and when she started asking me little sidling questions about love and what it was like. I told her that at her age, the best thing was to make friends, and that eventually one of those friendships would probably grow into something more.”

“So you call what she’s doing with Neville being friends?”

“Yes. What would you call it?”

“I... I’d call it... I don’t know.” Sirius sat down on the sofa with a sigh. “She’s so young, though. Not even ten yet. Were you thinking about boys at her age?”

“Girls are always thinking about boys. Not always thinking the same things, but always thinking about boys. At her age, I was mostly thinking about boys as a ‘How can Danger and I get back at Matt up the street for putting worms in our hair last Saturday’ thing.”

"I never saw you as the type to be bothered by worms in your hair."

"Not if I see them coming. He pulled a sneak attack."

"What did you do?"

"Stole his lunch at school and dumped pepper on everything."

"I knew there was a reason I loved you."

Aletha laughed. "Is that the only reason?"

"Well, no, but if I listed them all, we'd still be here next year. And we got off topic."

"Yes. You were saying that you feel Meghan's too young to be thinking about boys this way yet?"

Sirius nodded. "I thought it didn't start until they were at least twelve or so."

"Every girl is different. Every boy, too, for that matter. And think about it, Sirius. Meghan's never had a friend her own age. Everyone she knows, everyone she associates with, is two or three years older than she is, or an adult. Also, false modesty aside, she's highly intelligent and quite flexible. Does it surprise you too much that she's a bit precocious in some ways?"

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"And do you really have an objection to her choice?"

"Neville? Why would I? He's a good kid. A little quiet, and some confidence problems, but he's improving. He looks more like Alice, but he reminds me a lot of Frank. It's the little things, I think. Frank would always do the little things that no one else noticed, but that needed doing. Kept everything moving really nicely at Headquarters. You remember that?"

"I do. How he'd always be the one drawing up the duty schedules, and making sure the emergency kits were stocked, and keeping messages flowing... like you said, all the little things, the ones no one really notices until they don't get done." Aletha sighed. "Not enough people like him in the world."

"True. So I suppose Meghan could do a lot worse."

"Definitely true. And they are still both very young. I doubt anything will be happening we should be concerned about for another few years."

All the Weasleys were going to be home for Christmas this year, since Bill and Charlie had both managed to get time off, so the Pack was going to be alone for the holiday.

As alone as we ever get. Harry smiled as he waited for the Hogwarts Express to pull into Hogsmeade Station. There wouldn't be a formal Christmas party this year, since Meghan was still off her feet, but he had no doubt there would be plenty of visiting, by cubs and adults alike. Christmas, after all, was for friends and family.

Draco kept humming Christmas carols under his breath, but instead of this being irritating, it put everyone in the holiday mood, so much so that they were all singing along when the train pulled into King's Cross. Harry's feeling of Christmas cheer lasted until he crossed the magical barrier and spotted Danger.

For some reason known only to herself, his Pack-mother had chosen to meet the train wearing reindeer antlers and a flashing red nose. Harry briefly considered ducking back through the barrier and spending the holidays at Hogwarts instead, but Moony spotted him and waved before he could go through with it.

Draco spent a moment or two staring at Danger, then summed up Harry's feelings perfectly with one heartfelt word.

"Why?"

"It just struck me that I hadn't sufficiently embarrassed you lately," said Danger airily.

Ron seemed to be trying to look sympathetic, but the muffled guffaws coming out from behind his mittened hand were spoiling it. Hermione had pulled her scarf almost entirely over her face, and what little of it could be seen was phone-box red. Ginny was looking curiously at the nose. "Is it magic?" she asked.

"No, it runs on batteries. I'm considering getting your father one."

Ron shut up immediately.

Without any guests to house, it was his own bed that Harry checked over for pranks, later that afternoon, before flopping over onto it for a brief moment and savoring the feeling of being home. Then he got up and went downstairs to help with dinner.

The Den looked very festive, Harry thought, with the wallpaper turned red, green, and silver in honor of the season, and the Christmas tree in the music room threatening to be lifted off the ground by the packages under it. He'd have to watch out for the hallway, though. Padfoot had booby-trapped it with magical mistletoe, which attached itself to anyone who walked under it and wouldn't go away until they kissed someone of the opposite sex.

Though I suppose Meghan counts. Or Letha, or Danger...

"Scrape some carrots, please, Harry?" requested Danger without turning around from the sink. "We need something for people to munch on, so they're not asking me when dinner is every thirty seconds." The last three words were aimed directly at Draco, who whistled innocently as he set the table.

Harry grinned and went to the refrigerator.

The days of the vacation blurred happily together. Meghan spent most of them on the couch, but her energy was returning little by little, allowing her to be awake and alert and do things like make paper chains or help decorate sugar cookies. Neville came to visit often, usually staying for lunch or dinner before returning home, and Luna and the Weasleys had long since stopped knocking at the Den.

It reminded Harry a lot of the previous Christmas, only this time, instead of it being Ginny who had to stay inside, it was Meghan. He preferred this Christmas, though, if only because Ginny wasn't blushing and stammering every time she looked at him. In fact, she nailed him in the face with a snowball a few days before Christmas, jamming his glasses against his nose and nearly making him fall over.

Aunt Andy and Uncle Ted arrived early on Christmas Eve and stayed until after dinner, chatting with the adults. "I wish they'd leave," whispered Meghan to Harry. "Father Christmas won't come if there are people around."

Harry bit his lip, trying not to laugh. "Meghan, you do know there's no such person as Father Christmas?"

"That's what you say."

I tried.

The Pack went to bed early enough to satisfy even Meghan, and in the morning, Harry wasn't so sure himself that Father Christmas didn't exist. There were a lot of presents under the tree that hadn't been there before...

"And now, for the pride and joy of the collection," said Padfoot, bringing out a rather large and battered box. "This is from your Aunt Amy, cubs, and we don't even know what's in it."

"It arrived just in time," said Letha, opening it with her wand. "Day before yesterday."

"And the verdict is..." Danger drummed her hands on the coffee table.

"More boxes," said Letha, pulling them out. "One for each of you. Meghan – pass this down, there – Draco – Hermione – and Harry."

The box was square and a little smaller than a shoebox. Harry shook it and heard a dull sort of rattle within.

Only one way to find out...

He pulled out the flap holding it shut and flipped the lid up.

It looks like a belt. She got us belts?

No, wait. It's a belt, but it's wrapped around something. Maybe just the buckle...

A gasp from Hermione drew his attention. He stared.

Lying flat on his sister's palm was a gleaming silver dagger. The blade was about six inches long and looked sharp enough to cut anything, and a blue stone ornamented the handle.

Harry lifted his own gift from its box, feeling the weight inside the bundle of leather, too heavy to be even the most ornate of belt buckles. Slowly, he unwrapped the belt, revealing a dagger in a hanging sheath. His, he saw as he drew it, was identical to Hermione's, except that it had a red stone in the pommel.

"May I see?" said Moony's voice quietly. Harry turned to see Draco relinquishing his blade, with its green stone, to their alpha.

Moony hefted the blade, held it on his own palm, then, to Harry's surprise, on a fingertip. "Look at that balance," he said to Padfoot.

"These have to be goblin-made." Padfoot was examining Meghan's, which had a yellow stone inset in the handle. "They're gorgeous – I'm jealous already."

Moony returned the dagger to Draco, hilt first. Harry looked more closely at his own. Could he do that balancing on a fingertip trick?

He tried it, setting the knife on his left index finger at the same spot he'd seen Moony do it. The blade balanced for a moment, then fell, and Harry grabbed at it clumsily, hissing in pain as he caught it by the blade, which bit into his palm slightly.

"Hold still," said Letha, coming across the room with her wand. "Let me see." She held out her hand, and Harry put his own into it. A quick

word, and the cut was healed. "Clean that off, now," she instructed, conjuring a square of cloth. "You never leave a blade dirty."

Harry wiped his blood from the dagger's blade and sheathed it again, lifting the sheath and belt to his face so that he could catch the scent of the leather. This was far and away the best Christmas gift he'd ever gotten.

"Listen carefully, cubs, there are a few things you need to understand," said Danger, getting everyone's attention. "These are not toys. You are not allowed to play with them or even show them to anyone except your Pride. If we hear about them being played with, bragged about, shown around at school, or anything of that sort, whoever did it comes home and scrubs floors for a year before going back to school. Is that clear?"

The cubs nodded.

"When you were young, we used to call you warriors," said Moony. "We let it lapse as you got older. But I think it's time to bring it back. You are warriors, and you will need to be. Because in your lifetimes – probably before you finish school – you are going to encounter war."

Draco was nodding. Meghan was leaning forward to listen better. Hermione was absently stroking the pommel stone of her dagger, her eyes on Moony's face.

"Sirius and I will teach you the proper way to use these. But you are never to use them unless there is absolutely no other choice. And never on another student. If we'd make you miss a year of school just for showing these around, think about what we'd do if you actually hurt someone with them."

"You would wish that you weren't underage," added Padfoot. "So the law could have you. The law would be a lot nicer than we will, if someone else gets so much as a scratch from these."

Harry understood his Pack-fathers' cautions, but he was much more interested in the first things Moony had said. He remembered that he had thought of himself, when he was small, as a warrior. He

supposed they had dropped it when they moved to Devon, since it would have been hard to explain to the Weasleys why they called themselves that.

But it's true. Voldemort's not dead. He'll be back, and he'll try to get power again.

I guess you could say the war's still going on. It never ended, just stopped for a while.

He drew the dagger again and turned the blade so that he could see his reflection in it, complete with lightning-bolt scar. I stopped it.

And I have to be the one to end it.

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...

He swiped at the air, pretending Voldemort was in front of him. Take that! And that! And that –

A hand caught his wrist. "Stop that," said Padfoot. "Not only is it dangerous, you're holding it wrong." Strong fingers rearranged his on the handle. "That's a proper grip. Now take it in your other hand."

"What?" Harry frowned at his godfather. "Why? This is the hand I use most."

"That's exactly why. Switch hands."

The dagger felt awkward and heavy in his left hand. "I can't do it like this."

"Not yet. But you will. You're all going to learn to fight with either hand. It's a good way to surprise an enemy, and to be able to keep fighting if one hand gets incapacitated."

"Not to mention, it lets you fight magical and Muggle at the same time," said Letha. "Wand in one hand, blade in the other."

Harry nodded, looking at the knife in his left hand. He liked the idea. He could just see himself, casting spells with his right hand, stabbing and slashing with his left, fighting off a whole roomful of Death Eaters alone...

"Harry."

He looked up. Moony was standing beside him. "Come talk with me?"

Harry nodded and got up, carrying the belt with him. He started to put it on, but Moony stopped him, smiling. "Tradition, Greeneyes. You can't put it on yourself."

"What?"

"Someone has to gird you with it. It ought to be the lady of your heart, but just a lady will do. I wonder if we have any of those around here..."

Harry laughed. They were in the den room now, and Moony sat down on one of the cushions, motioning Harry to sit near him.

"What does this make you think of, Harry?" Moony lifted the dagger in its sheath. "What were you thinking, when you were looking at it and holding it?"

Harry took a breath to tell Moony all about his thoughts and dreams, then stopped. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea. "Not much," he said. "About Voldemort, I suppose. And how I have to stop him."

"Yes, how you have to stop him." Moony drew the dagger from its sheath and turned it so that the blade caught the weak sunlight coming through the window, casting reflections on the walls and ceiling. "The prophecy, of course. Do you remember what we discussed, Harry, after we told you about the prophecy?"

"Sort of."

"Let me refresh your memory." Moony sheathed the dagger again and looked Harry in the eye. "Just because you can defeat Voldemort

does not mean you will. It is just as possible – and right now, it is far more likely – that he will defeat you instead.”

Harry felt as if someone had emptied a bucket of ice water over his head. His pleasant daydreams vanished. But Moony wasn’t finished.

“I understand how easy it is to think of fighting as glamorous and war as glorious. It’s natural. You’re a boy – you’ll be a man someday – and boys and men like to fight. There’s nothing wrong with that. But Harry, the only glorious thing about war is when it ends. Do you know what war is, mostly?”

Harry shook his head.

“A lot of waiting, and I know you hate waiting. A lot of pain, and I’m fairly sure you don’t care for pain.”

Harry shrugged. “I’d rather not have it than have it.”

Moony smiled. “So would most people.” The smile vanished. “And then there’s the deaths. People die in war, Harry. Often, people that you care about very much. And you do know something about that.”

Another bucket of ice water, this one aimed directly at his heart.

Siss.

Moony sighed. “Harry, I don’t mean to pound you down. But I want you to know the truth. War isn’t anything anyone should want. But when it comes, we’ll deal with it. All of us, together. And in the meantime, you’ll be training and learning what you’ll need to know. All right?”

Harry nodded. “How’d you know?” he asked quietly.

“You had a certain look in your eyes. The same one James always had right before he said, ‘Hey, I know. Let’s go...’ Fill in the blank with the dangerous and illegal activity of your choice.”

Harry laughed a little, secretly pleased to hear he'd looked like his father, although he wasn't so enamored of the reason.

"I have a feeling you'll have plenty of opportunities to use this." Moony returned the sheathed dagger to Harry. "Just, please, don't go looking for them. If last year is any indication, they won't have any trouble finding you."

Harry nodded again, and accepted Moony's hand to help him up. They returned to the other room together in time for Harry to get in on the first knife fighting lesson, which Padfoot was holding immediately by popular demand.

Female warriors, it was decided, could be girded with their weapons by their fathers, so Letha supported Meghan as she stood for the first time in a month and a half while Padfoot buckled the belt holding the sheath around her waist. It didn't matter, of course, that it was taken off again straight away – it was the tradition that counted. Moony fastened Hermione's belt with a few quiet words that made her lift her head proudly, and Draco disappeared to the Lovegoods' during the afternoon and returned with his belt on and a very satisfied smile on his face.

Harry was left, as afternoon wore into evening, with a dilemma.

Who should I ask to put this on me?

Hermione and Meghan were available, but Harry had a feeling asking your sister to gird you with your first weapon was a little like asking your sister to go to a dance with you – it meant you couldn't get anyone else. The same for Danger and Letha. And he didn't think Luna should do it for him, after she'd already done it for Draco.

But who else do I know that's a girl?

Then he felt stupid. Of course. Why didn't I think of her before? Ginny!

He was halfway across the room to the Floo when he recalled what Moony had said. The belt was supposed to be fastened by "the lady of your heart".

Will Ginny think this means I fancy her?

Will she go over all funny on me again?

Harry scowled at his reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He wasn't at all eager for Ginny to go back to blushing every time she saw him and never saying anything to him. Not only would it make den-nights a lot harder, but he enjoyed talking with her. She knew a lot about Quidditch, and he was looking forward to next year, when she could try out for the team.

"Cheer up, dear, it can't be that bad," said the mirror.

"How do you know?" muttered Harry.

At least I can go over there. To show her and Ron what I got for Christmas. Then maybe I can bring it up. Casually, like it doesn't matter so much.

He was reaching for Floo powder before the thought was complete.

"The Burrow!"

Ron was delighted to see him. "Look what the twins got me," he said, showing it to Harry.

"Keep Yourself Amused," Harry read the title aloud. "By Yora Nidjit."

"I haven't gotten very far in it yet," confessed Ron. "It's not very interesting, really. All it says is, 'If you want to have fun, turn the page.' So I turn it, and on the next page it says..."

Harry nodded, biting his tongue hard. He would not laugh in his best friend's face, no matter how much he wanted to. That would be rude. "When did they give this to you?" he asked instead.

"This morning."

Harry's heart sank. Ron was his friend, but there were limits on how much stupidity he could tolerate in even the best of friends...

“But I didn’t look at it until just now.”

Oh, good. He just hasn’t had a chance to figure it out yet. “Ron, have you ever seen a little card that says, ‘Do you want to know how to keep an idiot busy for hours?’”

“Oh, I love those – because it tells you to turn the card over, and then it says the same thing on the other side...” Dawning comprehension was crowded out of the way by horror on Ron’s face. “Oh no...”

“I’ll help you get them back when term starts,” Harry promised. “Is Ginny around? I wanted to show you both something.”

“Downstairs somewhere.” Ron kicked his bed, on which the book was lying. “Bloody gits!”

“You’re just figuring that out now?”

Ginny was eventually located in her bedroom. “Happy Christmas, Harry,” she said, standing in the doorway. “How’s Meghan doing?”

“She’s fine. She stood up a little today, with Letha helping her. She might be back on her feet by the time term starts again.”

“That would be great.”

“Yeah, it would. I have something I want to show you. One of my Christmas presents. It’s up in Ron’s room.”

“I’m coming.” Ginny shut her bedroom door behind her.

Both Weasleys goggled when Harry unveiled his gift. “Wicked,” said Ron finally, in an awed whisper, touching the tip of the hilt with one finger. “Can I hold it?”

“Sure. It’s not too different from the ones we use in Potions, really...”

But Ron’s face said differently. He was caressing the hilt of the dagger, obviously lost in a daydream of fighting off fearsome enemies,

and Harry suddenly understood how Moony had known what he was thinking. It wasn't so hard to see, really, if you were looking for it.

"It's really nice, Harry," said Ginny, stroking the belt. "Who gave it to you?"

"Our Aunt Amy. Great-aunt really, she's Letha's aunt, she lives in America and works at a bank there. That's how she got these, because she works for goblins, and they're goblin-made."

"These? Do you have more than one?"

"No, we all got one. Me and Draco, and Hermione and Meghan. We all have different colored stones." Harry watched Ron slashing at the air in the corner of his room. "Listen, Ginny, I wondered if I could ask you a favor."

"What kind?"

"Well, it's kind of traditional for a warrior not to put on his weapon himself." Why was his face heating up? This was a perfectly logical thing to ask a friend to do. "He has to be girded with it by someone else. Usually a lady." And no law said he had to be looking at her. It was acceptable to be staring at the opposite wall. "I was wondering... would you do it for me?"

A pause stretched into a silence, which hung on so long that even Ron, lost in his dreams, noticed it, stopping for a moment to glance at them before returning to mutilating invisible foes. Finally, when Harry couldn't stand it any more, he turned to look at Ginny.

She might not have heard him at all for all the response she was exhibiting. One finger was tracing the tooling of the leather sheath, lying beside her on the bed, and her eyes were fixed on that.

"Ginny?"

"You want me to put your belt on you?"

At least she didn't sound disbelieving, or like she was making fun of him. She had just asked a question, as if she'd wanted to know what he'd had for breakfast, or what two and two made. "Yes. Please. You're really the only girl I know well, except Luna and my sisters, and Luna put Draco's on him, so I'd feel kind of funny asking her to do it, and I don't think a sister's really supposed to..."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes. I'll do it for you." Ginny looked up now, with a funny little smile on her face. "If only because you said please."

Harry sighed in relief. "Thanks. Ron, I need that back now."

"You are so lucky," said Ron, handing the dagger over. "All I ever get is a jumper from Mum, and something stupid from the twins." He glared at the book lying innocently on his bed.

"What about all that candy I saw you unwrapping?" asked Ginny. "A whole carton of Chocolate Frogs, and a super-sized bag of Bertie Bott's?"

"Yeah, but that's candy. You eat it and it's gone. Something like this..." Ron gestured to the dagger, his hands making circles in the air as he tried to find the right words. "This is just amazing."

Harry sheathed the dagger and held the belt out to Ginny. "Thank you for doing this," he said.

"You're welcome." Ginny took the belt from him and looked it over. "The buckle goes in the front?"

"Yeah, and the dagger hangs on the left, so I can reach it with my right hand. But the sheath moves, so I can swing it around to my other side if I want to. Padfoot's going to teach us to fight left-handed," Harry added to Ron, as Ginny turned the belt in her hands, getting it ready. "So we can use our wands and these at the same time."

"Double wicked," said Ron enviously. "Would he teach me? If I had one, I mean?"

"He might. Or we can, at den-nights, the way we do the hand-to-hand stuff." Harry frowned. "We'll have to see if we can find some kind of dulling charm, though, these are sharp..."

Ginny went to one knee and slid the belt around his waist, her arms almost encircling him as she did. She fastened the buckle in front, pulling it just as tight as it needed to be to stay up, and tucked the extra length of belt into one of the front belt loops. "There," she said, looking up at Harry. "All finished."

"Thanks, Ginny. This is really nice of you."

Ginny smiled again, standing up. "Like I said. Just because you said please. 'Scuse me?"

She was out the door and gone before either boy could say a word.

"Please tell me she's not going to get into the vanishing thing again," said Harry.

Ron shrugged. "Girls. I don't think anyone understands them, except them, and that's no help."

Harry nodded, perfectly in charity with this statement. "So. What should we do to the twins?"

The Pack allowed the cubs to stay up later than usual on New Year's Eve, but not quite late enough to see in the new year itself. It was almost 11:30 and snowing heavily as Sirius carried Meghan up the stairs to bed. The other cubs had already brushed their teeth and donned pajamas, and were climbing into their own beds as Remus tucked Meghan in.

"Tell us a story?" said Harry. "Please?"

"Please?" echoed the other cubs.

Remus chuckled. "Aren't you a little old for stories?"

"You told me once, you're never too old for a bedtime story," said Draco with a smug smile.

"Oh, all right. What would you like?"

"I'm surprised Harry lets you get away with that line about the lynx," said Sirius later. "Or doesn't he know what it means yet?"

"I'm hoping to sneak it in once or twice more before he figures it out." Remus took a sip of his champagne. "Call it propaganda if you must, but a few hints never hurt."

"At least he's on speaking terms with her," said Aletha. "Harry's not the love-at-first-sight type."

"He might get a crush at first sight," said Danger. "Be infatuated for a while. But I agree, if he's going to find someone to spend his life with, he'll want to know them well first. It's a good idea for everyone, really."

"Even if said knowing is occasionally a little forced." Remus wiggled his eyebrows in Danger's direction.

"Are you complaining?"

"Not in the least."

Fred and George woke up two days before their return to Hogwarts to find dunce caps affixed to their heads. Messrs. Padfoot and Moony took official responsibility for the prank, claiming they had to make sure their successors weren't getting soft. Harry and Ron spent a lot of that day snickering to themselves.

"Such a fine, upstanding example you set, Professor Black," scolded Aletha that night. "Playing pranks on your own students."

"It's the holidays, Letha. Give me a break."

"I'd like to give you a break," muttered Aletha, folding robes into her trunk. "I'd like to break your arm. Or your leg. Maybe then you'd settle

down a little, stop playing these stupid jokes, since you couldn't run away from everyone. Of course, it wouldn't help much, since you'd just get it healed up right away, and then you'd be fine again..."

Sirius let her mutter. It was good for her. Besides, she needed to let off some steam before he told her about his latest plan. She was sure to explode, otherwise.

"You know, I've been thinking about the whole warrior idea," he said casually a few minutes later.

"What about it?"

"It's good. But I think we need to take it a little farther."

"How do you mean?"

"We have the right idea with teaching Harry and the Pride how to defend themselves. But what about the rest of the students? Who's going to teach them? They are going to be in danger at some point, if Harry stays at Hogwarts. Shouldn't someone work with them, teach them some basic defense skills?"

Aletha turned around. "What are you suggesting, Sirius?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm telling you what I'm going to be doing when we get back to school."

Aletha motioned him to continue, her eyes skeptical.

"I'm starting a dueling club."

"A what?"

"A dueling club. A gathering of students, headed by me, in which the main focus is magical dueling. I'd hoped you'd help me with it."

"Help you do what? Blow yourself up at the same time every week? No."

Sirius shrugged. "Suit yourself. I have someone else lined up to help already."

"Who?"

"Our favorite Potions Master."

Aletha dropped the armload of socks she was holding. "Snape? You're letting Snape help you with this?"

"He seemed fairly enthusiastic about it, actually. As enthusiastic as he ever gets."

"Sirius, he doesn't really want to help you! He just wants an excuse to knock you around for a while! Are you honestly so dense that you can't see this?"

Sirius hid his glee. This was going precisely as he'd hoped. "Letha, we can't keep being mortal enemies forever if we're teaching at the same school. This'll be good for us. A chance to see which of us is really better with a wand. Besides, we won't really be dueling all that much ourselves. We'll do demonstrations at the beginning of each meeting, but then we'll be working with the students."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Aletha shook her head. "All right, fine. You've convinced me. I'm coming to this dueling club, if only to see you and Severus Snape do something together."

Yes! Got her!

"If you insist."

Now all I have to do is actually ask Snape about it...

Harry climbed the staircases wearily on Wednesday afternoon of their first week back, chilled to the bone after Quidditch practice and thinking longingly of the warm fire in the Gryffindor common room. Wood had let Draco and Ron off early, since he didn't plan to put them in for the next match in April, but Harry, being first team, had to stay.

“But what if I don’t want to?”

The voice, loud and petulant, echoed down the hall Harry was passing. He paused to listen.

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you do it, not whether you want to or not. Is that clear?”

Harry frowned. This second voice was familiar. As was the first, really, but he couldn’t put a name to either of them.

“Why should I do it?”

“Because I say you should. Or isn’t that enough for you?”

The first voice grumbled a little, and footsteps sounded. Harry beat a hasty retreat up the stairs, thinking hard.

I know those people. But I know half the school, so that’s really not helpful. It’s not anyone in the Pride, I know that, and I don’t think it’s Dean or Seamus... they were boys, both of them, they were boys’ voices. Not girls. So that narrows it down a little more...

The first one sounded younger than the second. My age, almost. And the second one like someone with authority...

“Password?” asked the Fat Lady.

Harry blinked. He hadn’t realized he’d arrived. “Er, castor oil.”

The portrait swung open, and Harry nearly took a step back at the blast of sound which emerged from the common room.

What’s going on?

“Harry!” Ginny came hurrying over to him. “We were wondering where you were – come see, there’s a dueling club been started!”

"A dueling club?" Harry forgot he was tired, clambering quickly through the portrait hole to meet her on the other side. "When? Where's it happening?"

"Tonight. Eight o'clock in the Great Hall. Everyone's talking about it. Do you want to go?"

"No, I think I'd rather do my Potions homework," said Harry mock-seriously, making Ginny laugh. "No, it sounds great. But I really should get my homework done early, if we're doing that later tonight..."

"Who's running it, do you know?" asked Ron as the Pride made their way down to the Great Hall at seven fifty-five.

Harry shook his head. "No idea."

"I heard Flitwick used to be a dueling champion," said Draco, turning in at the doors. "Maybe it's him."

"No, I think it's someone else," said Luna, pointing.

Meghan waved to them from her chair by the stage which had appeared along one side wall, replacing the House tables. Letha, standing near her, waved as well. Padfoot was busy writing signs in the air with red smoke from his wand. Harry and the rest of the Pride made their way over to the area indicated by a large arrow under the words FIRST AND SECOND YEARS, where Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan greeted them eagerly.

"Did you know, Harry?" asked Seamus.

Harry shook his head. "He kept it quiet, we had no idea."

"Do you train at home?" asked Dean.

"Sometimes," said Draco, his hand going to his waist, where Harry knew his dagger was hanging, hidden under his robes. "Never with magic, though. Just basic Muggle self-defense."

“Cool.” Dean was about to say something else, but broke off as Padfoot jumped up on the stage and waved his wand in a circle, saying something Harry couldn’t hear over the crowd noise.

The roar of a lion startled everyone into silence. “Just wanted to get your attention,” said Padfoot, grinning, as the students turned to face him. “Welcome to the first session of the Hogwarts Dueling Club. A duel, as you may or may not know, is a battle with rules. Everything from your choice of spells to when you start and stop is regulated. The rules are there to keep you, and everyone else around you, safe. Please respect them, or you’ll be politely asked to leave. Which is code for, kicked out.”

A ripple of laughter went through the group.

“Now, we’re going to have a short demonstration duel. Professor, if you would join me on stage?”

Harry looked at Letha, but she didn’t move. Draco poked him.

“What?”

His brother pointed. Harry turned in time to see Professor Snape walk onto the stage, with an expression of satisfaction on his face.

Harry gulped. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to see this or not. On one hand, a combat between his godfather and Professor Grumpy was sure to be amazing, but on the other, he didn’t want Padfoot to get hurt...

He can take care of himself. Harry abandoned worry and watched.

“The combatants face each other and bow,” said Letha from her place beside the stage. Padfoot and Snape did so. “Then they turn and take a predetermined number of paces away – we’re using five.” Each wizard walked five steps away from the other. “They turn, and bring their wands to the ready.” Padfoot’s wand was in front of him, Snape’s over his head.

“On the count of three, gentlemen. One – two – three.”

“Expelliarmus!” cried Snape, as Padfoot shouted, “Oppilorbis!”

A jet of crimson light shot from Snape’s wand and struck the yellow disk Padfoot’s had emitted, shattering against it with a sound like hot metal striking water. The students broke into applause.

“Professor Snape used a Disarming Charm,” Letha informed them all, coming onto the stage. “Professor Black blocked the spell with a basic Orbis Block. Had his block not worked, he would have lost his wand. Why don’t you show them what that looks like, Professors?” she suggested, and Harry was sure there was a hint of malice in her tone. He suspected Padfoot had done something recently to annoy her.

Padfoot nodded resignedly and lowered his wand. Snape swung his up with a look of pure glee and shouted his spell again. The jet of red light struck Padfoot full force, knocking him backwards into the wall and throwing his wand all the way across the Hall. Letha Summoned it back with her own. “Thank you, Professor Snape,” she said, tossing it in Padfoot’s direction as the students applauded again. “Very impressive.”

Snape nodded curtly.

“She thinks I roped her into it,” said Padfoot to Harry some time later, after the teachers had demonstrated a few more spells and the students had started practicing on one another. Harry had paired up with Ron, who couldn’t seem to get the hang of the Disarming Charm, but could throw up a pretty decent block already. “But she said she wanted to come...”

“Probably only so she could watch you and Snape hex it out,” said Draco over his shoulder.

“Be polite, Draco, we’re in public. Professor Snape.”

Draco rolled his eyes and turned back to his duel with Neville.

“Now let’s see you two try a few,” said Padfoot. “Harry, you cast, Ron, you block.”

Letha threaded her way through the crowd from the other side of the Hall, where she’d been coaching the older students. “I’ve just had an excellent suggestion,” she said. “Why not put a couple of volunteers up on stage? One pair from each age group?”

“I like that. OY!” bellowed Padfoot, getting everyone’s attention again. “Who thinks they’re good enough to show off a bit?”

Hands went up all over the place. Padfoot and Letha had a brief hand signal conversation, which Harry caught only the gist of, but that was enough.

“He won’t pick us,” he muttered to the Pride. “It’d look too much like favoritism.”

“We’ll get our chance,” said Hermione comfortingly.

“You, Finch-Fletchley, you’re one,” said Padfoot after a moment of thinking. “And Nott, you’re the other. Up with you.”

The two boys scrambled onto the stage. Snape was looking surprised, Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye. Surprised and – could it be gratified?

“Face each other and bow,” instructed Letha. “Turn and walk your five paces. Turn again, wands at the ready – on three.”

Nott looked a little unsure of himself, Harry thought, but then Justin did too. Anyone would, with the entire school watching...

“One – two–”

“Serpensortia!” shouted Nott.

An enormous black snake exploded out of his wand, landed directly in front of Justin, and raised itself, hissing, ready to strike.

Without even thinking about it, Harry was running forward, jumping onto the stage. The vibrations he made drew the snake's attention, and as it turned to look at him, he shouted.

"Back the hell off! He didn't do anything!"

The snake looked mildly affronted, but lowered its head to the ground, with an air of, Well, I wasn't really going to bite him anyway.

Harry became more aware of his surroundings. His heart was pounding, and he could hear it in his ears, because of the unnatural hush in the Hall. Everyone was staring at him. Padfoot flicked his wand at the snake, muttering "Evanescio," without taking his eyes from Harry.

And then it sank in what he'd done.

He'd spoken Parseltongue. In public.

He leapt from the stage and ran.

He had to get away before anyone saw him cry.

(A/N: Yes, it's more or less canon, but there are reasons... there are always reasons...

Several things that happen in this chapter will be echoed later in the story. So don't forget it, or them. Please review, and tell me what you think about salt, if you like. And I shall try to put up review responses, clearly labeled "Review Responses", on the Yahoo group, and soon. Many hugs to all!)

Chapter 30: Potions and Pendants

Water dripped persistently nearby, a steady rhythm over which his sobs created syncopation. There wasn't much light, which suited him fine. And something smelled terrible.

Harry raised his head from his arm long enough to identify his surroundings – Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He had no very clear idea of how he'd gotten here, but it was as good a place as any, except for the smell, and he could tolerate that.

It smells like the potion. I knew we missed a spot.

But that only reminded him of Siss' fits of serpentine laughter when he had told her about the prank they planned to play on Snape.

I did know about that smell. I must have forgotten. But I have to have known, if I told Siss...

A great wave of grief broke over him again as he thought her name. He had only time to feel vaguely indignant about it before it stole all his restraint, all his control, and left him flat on the damp floor, shaking. His world consisted of several square feet of cold tile and a very sore throat, and it would never change; he would lie here and cry until he ran out of tears, and then he would just lie here.

"Here you are," said a quiet voice, and someone sat down beside him. Harry lifted his head again and blinked swollen eyes, then realized part of the problem was that his glasses were smudged. He pulled them off and started to wipe them with his robes, but she took them gently from his hand and set them on her other side instead. "You'll scratch the lenses," she said. "And I don't think you need them at the moment."

"Can't see without them," Harry mumbled.

"I know. But you don't need to see right now. You just need to get this over with."

"I thought I was over it." Harry sniffled hard, then accepted the handkerchief she gave him. "I thought I wasn't going to cry any more."

"Grief's not a thing you can put on a timetable, Harry. Remember? There's no standard for it, no right or wrong way to do it, except to pretend the person never existed and try to escape it that way. That's wrong. And sometimes the hurt comes back when you're not expecting it. Is that the first time you've spoken Parseltongue since Siss died?"

Harry dried his eyes carefully. "Second," he said. "But this was right in public..." His control crumbled again, this time to anger, and he punched the wall behind him. "Why do I keep on messing up and letting out secrets and telling people things they shouldn't know?"

"Because you're human, and twelve years old, and not perfect yet."

The last word made Harry laugh a little.

"And for the same reason, you still cry for Siss. Because you're human, with all the bad and all the good. And more of the good than the bad, in my admittedly biased opinion. Yes, there will be talk about this. There's always talk. But you appear to have stopped that snake from attacking – what did you say to it?"

"Told it to back off, Justin didn't do anything."

"Good work. You stopped what might have been a very bad situation. And Mr. Nott is currently in conference with three professors, including the Headmaster, discussing where he learned that spell, why he felt the need to use it today, and why he chose to cast it before he should have. He'll have quite a number of detentions, and he won't be returning to the dueling club."

Harry nodded to show he understood.

"Are you feeling a little more ready to come back now?"

"A little."

“Good.” Letha blotted his glasses dry with a piece of soft cloth she conjured and handed them back to him, then frowned, sniffing the air. “What is that smell?”

“Don’t know,” Harry lied, moving one hand quickly from his glasses to cross his fingers behind his back.

“It’s someone’s robes,” said Moaning Myrtle, rising out of her usual toilet stall. “Someone left their old robes in here. I don’t know who it was, though, I didn’t see them.”

“Where are they?” Letha stood up and lit her wand, coming to the end of the bathroom where Myrtle was pointing. “Hmm. Standard black robes, all the students and half the teachers wear these, no help there.” She picked them up, wrinkling her nose. “Whoever wore them was tall. And none too careful about their appearance – look here, on the chest, there’s a stain.”

Harry looked. There was indeed a darker patch on the chest of the robes, vaguely shield-shaped. Probably where Snape got hit with the potion, he thought, and had to smile. “I think I can make the smell go away,” he said.

“Give it a try.” Letha held the robes out in front of her.

Harry drew his wand and pointed it at the robes. “Smellius Interruptus,” he said.

Letha looked hard at him, dropping the robes to the floor. “Smellius Interruptus?”

“I know, it doesn’t sound real, but it’s the only thing that works.”

“That’s not what I was wondering about. Harry, I assume this has something to do with the slugs in Snape’s cauldron before Christmas.”

Harry stared at her.

“No, I’m not reading your mind,” said Letha, smiling slightly. “It just so happens that I’m familiar with that potion. I knew the inventor.”

“You did?” Harry pulled the bathroom door open for Letha. “Thanks, Myrtle,” he said over his shoulder.

Letha nodded to the ghost as well, who blushed silver and dived back into her stall. “Yes, I did,” she said, turning back to Harry. “Where did you get that recipe?”

“Hermione found it on a piece of parchment in an old book in the library.”

“Yes, that makes sense. She was always leaving things around.”

“She?”

“Yes, she. Does that surprise you?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s such a great prank. I guess I thought it might have been my dad.”

Letha chuckled. “No, James was never all that clever with potions. He could brew decently following instructions, but he’d never invent a new one. He left that to other people.”

“Like you,” said Harry. “Was it you?”

“I’m flattered that you think it might have been, but no, it wasn’t me either. You were closer than you knew when you thought of your father.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know. My mum?”

“Third time lucky,” said Letha. “Well done.”

Harry stopped walking. “I was joking,” he said.

“You’re still right.”

“My mum invented it?”

“Yes. She had a terrible time getting it to respond to that spell, though. She went through six or seven rebrews before she got it right, and she would always test it out on the most annoying people in her year.”

Harry felt another smile working its way up to his face, and let it. Siss wouldn't have wanted him to be sad all the time. “Dad and Padfoot and Moony.”

“However did you guess?” Letha sounded entirely innocent. “They spent more of their sixth year smelling horrendous than I think they want to remember. And as far as I know, they never found out why.”

Harry actually laughed a little at this.

“You are feeling better. I'm glad.”

Harry nodded. “People are going to talk, though,” he said as they came to a staircase. “About me being a Parselmouth. Aren't they?”

“Yes, I'm sure they are. People will talk about anything, if you've noticed. But I do think this will create a little more gossip than usual.”

Harry stared down at the steps, absently jumping the vanishing one as he came to it. “But there really wasn't anything else I could have done, was there?” he asked.

“Not really. And I think you'll manage what's coming. Your Pride already all knew about this, so they won't be staring and whispering, and everyone else, you're used to. No, what I think you should be prepared for...” Letha stopped as a group of sixth years passed them on the stairs, nodding to her and looking curiously at Harry.

“What I think you should be prepared for,” she resumed, “is that people may think you're the Heir of Slytherin.”

“What?”

“Don’t shout, please, the last thing we need is Peeves or Filch popping ‘round. Yes, Harry, people are going to jump to conclusions, though honestly, for someone who doesn’t know you, it’s not much of a jump. The Chamber of Secrets is being opened, it can only be opened by the Heir of Slytherin, the line of Slytherin is characterized by Parseltongue, and you are a Parselmouth. Case closed. As I said,” she added quickly, seeing Harry’s face, “for someone who doesn’t know you.”

Harry couldn’t remember his emotions ever behaving quite like this before. First he’d been so horribly sad, then he’d started to feel better, and now he was blazing mad. “But – I wouldn’t do that! I didn’t!”

“You know that. I know that. The rest of the world doesn’t know that. And I’m afraid telling them, at this point, would just look like you’re trying to get yourself off.”

Harry kicked the wall furiously.

“You’re very angry with Hogwarts today,” Letha said conversationally. “That’s the second time you’ve hit it.”

“What should I hit, then?”

“Are you finished with your homework?”

“Yes, I did it after Quidditch practice.”

“Come on, then.” Letha set off in a different direction.

Their destination, Harry realized after a few moments, was the Defense teachers’ office. Meghan and Neville looked up from a game of Go Fish as they came in, but half Neville’s matches seized the opportunity to escape, freeing Harry from having to say anything to his friend, since it was difficult to talk with someone who was on the floor chasing cards. Meghan just shrugged.

Letha pulled one of the small targets they had used on the first day of class from her desk drawer as she passed, then opened the door which led into the classroom. Harry followed her.

“Here,” instructed Letha, preparing the target with a few waves of her wand. “Fire away.”

Harry drew his wand and began shooting sparks at the target, which remained still at first, then started moving, becoming faster and more erratic as time passed. He started having to chase it down – he was barely aware of jumping onto desks and over chairs – all that mattered was that he hit the target with one more spark – one more – one more...

Suddenly the target was gone. Harry turned in a circle, looking for it. Where had it disappeared to?

“I think that’s enough for one night,” said Padfoot from behind him. Harry spun, startled. He hadn’t heard anyone come in.

Padfoot, Letha, Meghan, and Neville were all ranged on the small balcony that the door from the office opened onto. All of them looked impressed.

“Feeling better?” continued Padfoot with a smile, displaying Harry’s target, shrunk to hand size. It was almost impossible to see the original pattern, so much of it was covered in scorch marks.

Harry smiled back. “Yes,” he said truthfully.

“Excellent. Come on, it’s late and you should be in your dorm. I’ll walk you two back to the Tower so you don’t get in trouble for being out of bounds.”

He was not in the best of moods when he got back to his dormitory, and it didn’t improve any when he saw the slip of parchment on his bed waiting for him. He picked it up and read it over, then crumpled it and threw it to the floor. He hated being ordered around, as if he were no more than a house-elf.

Still, at the time stated, he was where the note had instructed him to be.

"There," he said sullenly to the other. "I did it. And I didn't tell them why. Are you happy now?"

"Quite," said the other, amusedly. "You've done your part now. Just sit back and watch the fun." He leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Potter's going to have a great deal to explain tomorrow."

Harry was aware of eyes on him and whispers as he passed the next morning in a way he hadn't been since the start of his first year. People had gotten tired of it quickly then, once they saw that he didn't have tentacles or seven eyes. He hoped they'd get over this just as quickly.

Classes proceeded more or less normally. Snape was tight-lipped and grim all through Potions, and spent most of the class deducting points from Gryffindor for things like holding their knives incorrectly or breathing too close to their ingredients. He managed to terrorize Neville so much that Neville melted his cauldron, something he hadn't done all year so far, and earned himself a detention for Saturday, plus twenty points taken from Gryffindor.

"I kept track," said Hermione after class, displaying a bit of parchment with numbers scribbled on it. "Snape took sixty-five points from Gryffindor in just that one lesson."

"What?" said Harry in disbelief. Ron was slightly more vociferous, making Hermione protest faintly, though she seemed to enjoy the vision his words conjured up.

"It would only have been forty-five without me," said Neville sadly.

"It's not your fault," said Draco. "He was after us all class. What did we do?"

"I don't know." Then a flash of dark hair caught Harry's eye. "But I know who we can ask. Professor Black!"

"I still can't get used to that," said Padfoot, stopping and turning on the lowest step of the marble stairs. "Hello, everyone. You look cheerful. Just had Potions?"

Five heads nodded glumly.

“How many points did he take?”

“Sixty-five,” said Hermione, handing Padfoot her calculations.

Padfoot looked over her numbers, then up at the hourglasses recording House points, and frowned. “I make it seventy.”

“Oh no, did I add wrong?”

“No, he must just have taken another five,” said Ron, watching the ruby-filled glass.

“Or someone else did,” said Draco. “Snape’s not the only teacher around, you know.”

“Why’s he doing that?” asked Harry.

Padfoot twisted his right hand around his left thumb. I really shouldn’t be telling you this, he was saying silently, but...

“We won’t tell anyone but the girls,” Harry promised.

“Dumbledore took fifty points from Slytherin last night,” said Padfoot quietly, making sure no one was around to hear him first. “Thirty for that spell Nott used – it’s semi-legal at best, and certainly no second year should know it – and twenty for casting it before he should have.”

“So Snape’s trying to even things out,” said Neville. “By bringing Gryffindor down.”

“That’s right. And I’m sure he’ll be docking the other Houses as well. But we’ll manage somehow.” Padfoot looked at the hourglasses and smiled. “For instance. Harry. For averting a crisis last night, I think you deserve, oh, let’s say fifteen points.”

Rubies fell with a clatter. Padfoot sighed happily. "I love doing that. Now, Hermione, for having the presence of mind to add this up..."

The Pride grinned at each other as Padfoot found reasons, small but valid, to give their House points making up for what Snape had unfairly taken off.

"I'm not replacing everything," he warned. "That would be a dead giveaway that it was me. Besides, I'm sure you deserve a few of those point losses for some things we didn't catch you doing."

The Pride assumed a collective expression of great innocence.

"Save it for someone who doesn't know you like I do," advised Padfoot. "Go on, before I find an excuse to dock you a few just because I can."

Harry turned and put his foot on the first stair.

"Everyone but Harry, I need to talk to you."

"What, again?" said Draco under his breath. Harry kicked his brother's foot, and Draco poked him with his quill as he went by.

"I think you should go find that Hufflepuff boy," said Padfoot when he and Harry were alone. "What's his name, Finch-Fletchley. You need to apologize to him."

"Apologize? What for?"

"Not—" Padfoot held up a placating hand. "Not because you actually did anything wrong. But because you scared him. He had no idea what you were saying to the snake. None of us did. Some of us had a better guess than others, of course, but he's not one of them. He doesn't know you well, does he?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think he likes me," he said. "And he thinks Meghan shouldn't be here."

Padfoot sighed. "I'm damn glad she was," he said, gripping Harry's shoulder for a moment. "I don't know what we would have done..." He didn't have to finish.

"So, you think I should apologize for scaring Justin," said Harry after a moment.

Padfoot nodded. "Or at least explain, if not apologize. Try to get on better terms with him."

"All right. Do you know where I could find him?"

"Try the library," Padfoot advised. "I was up there a few minutes ago and saw some Hufflepuffs in there. Looked like your year. He might have been with them. I'm going that way, if you're interested."

They went up two staircases together, then Padfoot tapped his cheek with two fingers, as did Harry, and they shook hands, the quick and public version of a scent-touch. Padfoot went down the corridor, and Harry went up two more staircases and into the library.

The group of Hufflepuffs Padfoot had noticed were indeed there, and they didn't seem to be doing homework. Harry slipped between two bookshelves to listen to what they were saying.

"You're sure Justin's all right, Ernie?" asked a girl with blonde pigtails.

"Positive," said a rather stout boy. "He's in our dorm, and there's no way Potter could know the password, only teachers and prefects know them. He'll be safe there, if any of us are safe anywhere," he added darkly. "With Slytherin's Heir on the loose..."

"You think it is Potter, then?" asked another girl.

"It has to be, Susan," said Ernie surely. "He's a Parselmouth. There's never been a decent wizard who could speak to snakes. Besides, look at his family. The last of the Blacks and the last of the Malfoys, for all he calls himself Black now. Those are two of the Darkest

families around. Black by name and black by nature, my father always says.”

“I say, that hurts,” said a quiet voice from between Harry’s hands. He looked down to see that he was gripping a book on a nearby shelf very tightly.

“Sorry,” he muttered, releasing it and edging nearer to the Hufflepuffs. Ernie was speaking more quietly now, Harry could barely hear him.

“Of course he seems nice,” he was saying impatiently to Hannah, who must have asked a question Harry’d missed. “He can’t go around being mean to people, that’d be a dead giveaway. And think about it this way. You-Know-Who was a really powerful Dark wizard, the most powerful in a long time. Only another wizard just as powerful as him could have survived one of his curses. Just as powerful. And just as Dark. You-Know-Who probably didn’t want the competition...”

Harry turned a guffaw into a loud cough and emerged from between the shelves. The Hufflepuffs all stared at him, frozen in place, as if the very sight of him had Petrified them.

“Hello,” he said. “I was hoping you could tell me where to find Justin Finch-Fletchley.”

“And what do you want with Justin?” asked Ernie in a voice that shook slightly, stepping forward and squaring his shoulders as if daring Harry to do his worst.

“I was hoping to apologize for scaring him at the dueling club yesterday.”

“Apologize?” The word took Ernie by surprise. “You want to apologize?”

“Yes. I didn’t mean to scare anyone, but I didn’t want to see Justin get bitten by that snake.”

“Didn’t you?” Ernie pounced on this. “Then why did you chase it toward him?”

“Chase it – I never!” Harry’s momentary amusement vanished. “I told it to leave him alone!”

“You could say you told it London Bridge is falling down, we’d have no way to tell if you were telling the truth,” Ernie shot back.

“You were there, weren’t you?”

“Yes, we all were.”

“Then you saw what happened. You saw that the snake lay down after I talked to it, that it wasn’t trying to bite Justin any more.”

“I know what I saw,” said Ernie resolutely, “and I’m warning you, stay away from Justin. He’s got as much right to be here as anybody, just because he’s Muggle-born is no reason to try to scare him away from the school...”

“What are you talking about?”

“We know all about what Slytherin tried to do,” said Ernie, indicating himself and the other Hufflepuffs. “Clear the school of Muggle-borns. And his Heir would want to do the same, wouldn’t he?”

“I’m not Slytherin’s Heir,” said Harry through gritted teeth, “and what possible reason could I have for hating Muggle-borns?”

“I’ve heard you hate your Muggle relatives,” said Ernie quickly.

“I don’t even know my Muggle relatives. I haven’t seen them since I was two.”

“But you hated them then.”

Harry felt an intense wish to punch Ernie’s sanctimonious face. “This is stupid,” he said instead. “If any of you see Justin, would you mind telling him I’m sorry for scaring him? And I’m also sorry if I scared any of you. Next time I speak Parseltongue in public, I’ll make sure to tell everyone in advance.” He spun around and stalked out of the library,

clenching his fists by his sides so as not to knock any of the books off the shelves.

This is ridiculous. I shouldn't have to explain myself to them. Why won't they believe me? Do they like being self-contained little idiots who won't believe anything except what's under their noses? Maybe they should get attacked...

He was so busy thinking furious thoughts that he didn't even notice the large blockage in the hall ahead of him, and walked slap into it, falling over backwards. The jolt broke him out of his mood.

"Hello, Hagrid," he said, looking up.

"All righ', Harry?" asked Hagrid, offering Harry a hand.

"Fine, thanks," said Harry, getting up. "You?"

"None so bad." Hagrid's hair and beard were flecked with snow. "Yeh look a bit upset – sure yeh're all righ'?"

"Just some people talking," said Harry unhappily. "You heard what happened last night?"

"Yeah, I heard." Hagrid patted Harry on the back, making him stagger forward a pace. "Don' worry 'bout it, Harry, people always talk. All yeh have ter be is a little different, do somethin' mos' people can't, or don't like, an' people talk as if yer a criminal bred'n'born. Don' yeh pay no mind ter it."

"Thanks," said Harry, trying to smile. "Listen, Hagrid, I've got to go, I've got loads of studying to do..."

"Take care, Harry."

"I will."

Harry walked away, not sure if he felt better or not. Hagrid didn't think ill of him, but Hagrid didn't think ill of anyone Dumbledore liked, and Dumbledore still liked him, he thought...

But what about the rest of the school?

Ernie's words kept coming back to him.

"There's never been a decent wizard who could speak to snakes..."

He climbed a staircase and turned down a dark corridor, where the torches had been put out by a freezing draft blowing through a cracked windowpane. Have to tell someone about that, he thought vaguely, just before he tripped over something and went sprawling.

What the...

He rolled over to see what he'd tripped on and felt his body chill.

Justin Finch-Fletchley lay flat on his back, utterly rigid, with an expression of shock frozen on his features and his eyes fixed blankly on the ceiling. Next to him, hovering six inches from the floor, was Nearly Headless Nick, but not upright and silvery-white and cheerfully talkative, as he usually was. No, this Nick was horizontal, a smoky black, and completely unresponsive, as if he'd been hit with whatever had hit Justin.

But what kind of magic can affect a ghost like that?

Harry got up slowly, his breath coming quickly, his heart thumping against his ribs as if it wanted out. The only living creatures in the hallway, as far as he could see, were a bunch of spiders, scuttling up the wall towards the windowpane which was letting in the draft. But someone was bound to come along, someone would find him here, and think the worst... he could run away, and no one ever had to know he'd been here, he could tell Padfoot or Letha secretly, but Justin and Nick needed help, he couldn't just leave them...

A horrendous cackle sounded from around the corner, and Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting past Harry, knocking his glasses off. "Lurking about in dark corridors, Potty?" he chortled. "Lurking about talking to snakes?" He spun three times in midair and froze halfway through a fourth. He'd just seen Justin and Nearly Headless Nick.

“Peeves, please don’t–” Harry began, but he was too late. Peeves was already screaming in a voice that resembled an air-raid siren.

“ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK ON THE FIFTH FLOOR! GHOSTS AND MORTALS ALIKE BEWARE! ATAAAAACK!”

Harry had never wanted so much to drop through the floor and disappear. Doors slammed open all along the corridors, people swarmed out, students shoving to get a better look, teachers shouting for silence. Justin was several times in danger of being trampled, and people kept running through Nearly Headless Nick.

“Caught in the act!” yelled a voice Harry knew, and he turned with a sick feeling to face Ernie, the Hufflepuff boy from the library, pointing at him dramatically. “Harry Potter did this!”

“Macmillan!” said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was swinging by his knees from an invisible bar above everything, snickering and humming to himself. “Potter’s a rotter,” he crooned. “Oh, Potter, you rotter...”

Harry gulped, hoping he wasn’t about to be ill in front of everyone.

“Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,” sang Peeves, horribly off-key. “You’re killing off students, you think it’s good fun...”

Professor McGonagall straightened from examining Justin and gave Peeves a look. “Shoo,” she said curtly, and Peeves shooed, but not before smacking Harry’s glasses off once more, and Harry heard the song echoing down the hallway Peeves had just turned into as he picked them up. People were staring at him and whispering as the teachers cleared the hallway, but he didn’t pay attention to much of anything else until Professor McGonagall said, “Potter.”

He looked up. The hallway was empty in front of him. Dully he wondered how they’d moved Nearly Headless Nick – how did one move an unconscious ghost? – but he wasn’t really terribly interested. “Professor, I swear I never–”

"I am not accusing you of anything, Potter," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "Come along."

They walked a short way and turned a corner, and Harry stopped in surprise. He hadn't realized they were so close to the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Sherbet lemon," said Professor McGonagall, and drew her wand as the gargoyle moved aside. A pair of small silver cats sprang from the tip and dashed away down the hall in opposite directions. "Professor Dumbledore will be along in a few moments," she said. "Up you go."

Harry nodded and stepped onto the spiral staircase.

The office at the top looked much the same as it usually did, with the snoozing portraits on the walls, the shelves full of books and interesting artifacts, the large desk with the chairs in front of it. Harry sat in one of these to wait, before an odd, choking noise made him whirl.

"Fawkes," he said in relief, looking at the phoenix, sitting on its golden perch behind the door. "You scared me." He took a closer look. "You look terrible. Is it a Burning Day?"

Fawkes made his noise again, then shivered, puffed himself up, and burst into flames. Harry jumped a little, even though he was expecting it. It was one of those things he'd never quite get used to, he thought, much like Padfoot's habit of waking him with a cold nose to the back of his knee when he wouldn't get up in the morning.

The door opened and Harry looked around, then smiled. Thinking of his godfather seemed to have summoned him, and he was followed by Dumbledore and Hagrid. "It can't've bin Harry, sir," Hagrid was saying fervently as they came in. "We were talkin' seconds before, he couldn't've had time, I'd swear it at the Ministry o' Magic if I had ter..."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "Ah, Harry, there you are."

Padfoot looked down his nose at Harry. "This wasn't what I had in mind when I said apologize," he said.

"But..." Harry had time for the one word before he realized he was being teased. In the presence of the Headmaster, he contented himself with a quick hand-signed threat for later before turning to Dumbledore. "I was just walking, sir, and I tripped over Justin," he said. "The hallway was dark, I couldn't see where I was going."

"I understand completely. May I ask why Mr. Macmillan chose to accuse you in such a public manner? Had you had words on this subject previously?"

"We were talking in the library a few minutes ago," said Harry. "I had asked him where Justin was, because I wanted to apologize for scaring him at the dueling club, and he as good as accused me of being Slytherin's Heir."

Dumbledore nodded somberly. "It was to be expected, I am afraid, with the public revelation of your unusual gift. I must ask you, Harry, not to judge people too harshly. They are frightened and worried, and seeking someone to blame, and you seem a likely candidate. I must also ask you if there is anything you wish to tell me."

A silence descended on the office. The only sounds were the snoring of the portraits, the soft whirring of the silver instruments on their tables, and the quiet cheeping of the baby Fawkes in his nest of ashes.

Harry shook his head. "No, sir," he said. "Nothing."

All in all, Harry had never been so glad for a den-night in his life. The common room was packed with people yammering about Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, but opening the entrance to the Hogwarts Den in stealth mode solved this, and the warriors of the Pride were soon dropping onto the red bed one after another. Even Meghan was present, having persuaded Padfoot and Letha that she was well enough to return to her sleeping quarters in Gryffindor Tower, if not to her duties in the hospital wing.

"Aunt Andy's coming to talk with me when I'm all better again," she announced after Draco had inaugurated the den-night, as was traditional for the beta male, and Hermione, as alpha female, had asked who had a story to tell. "She wants to see me do my Healing. But Mama Letha and Madam Pomfrey don't think it's a good idea for me to try it until after I'm strong again."

"How did it feel, when you Healed Harry?" asked Luna, scooting closer to Meghan.

"It was like being somewhere else. A dark room, with a door that Harry wanted to go through..."

Harry moved away from this conversation, having heard it before, not to mention lived through it. "Hermione," he said instead. "Did you ever figure out who invented that potion we used on Snape?"

Hermione shook her head. "It was just signed L.C."

"Elsie?" repeated Harry. "Like short for Elizabeth?"

"No, initials. A letter L, and then a letter C."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'll show you tomorrow."

"All right."

"Where'd you go yesterday?" asked Ron. "When you ran out of the Great Hall?"

"Just off somewhere," said Harry dismissively. Then he smiled. "But I think I found Snape's old robes. The ones he got that potion on. They smelled right for it. And they had a dark stain right here." He drew the location with his finger. "It looked like a shield."

Ginny grinned. "What did you do with them?"

"Left them there," said Harry.

“Where’s there?”

“Myrtle’s bathroom.”

Ginny stood up. “Where’re you going?” asked Ron.

“I’m going to go get them.”

“Why?”

“For a trophy. Fred and George keep trophies from their really good pranks, so why shouldn’t we?”

Harry hid his smile behind his mug of hot chocolate (they had put in a standing order at the beginning of the year for snacks at den-night, so that the house-elves supplied them without having to be asked). He liked Ginny a lot better than he’d thought he would when they’d first met. Of course, then, he’d had his secret to hide, and she had been oddly sure that he was lying about something. But that was in the past now, and he was free to be friends and Pridemates with her.

Ginny disappeared into the red bedroom. “You know, if she’s going to do that, I’ll go get that recipe,” said Hermione, standing up. “Do you know who invented it, Harry?”

“Not exactly,” Harry temporized. “I might, but I want to have a look at it first.”

“How’d you find out?” asked Draco.

“Would you believe Letha told me?”

“Probably not.”

“Good.”

Hermione returned a few minutes later with the piece of parchment. “Here it is,” she said, handing it to Harry. “It was in between the leaves of one of the copies of Hogwarts, a History.”

Harry smiled. He could see his mother, as he knew her from the stories, reading the book Hermione loved so. Leaving a recipe for a prank potion in it was a bit more of a stretch, but he was willing to believe Letha.

The handwriting on the paper was well-rounded and easily legible, and there at the bottom was the signature, two initials. L.C.

But Mum's last name was Evans...

Harry had an idea. "Wait here," he said, and now it was his turn to run into the red bedroom and jump on the bed, being sure to invoke stealth mode as he opened the ceiling, so that no one would see him climbing out of a hole in the wall.

He sped up to his dorm, dug through his things, and hurried back down again with what he was looking for under his arm, grateful that most of the Gryffindors thought the idea of him being Slytherin's Heir was poppycock, so they weren't watching him terribly closely, doubly grateful that Percy Weasley was nowhere to be seen. If Percy should realize that he, Harry, plus two of Percy's siblings, all three of Harry's own, and their two closest friends, were missing from the dorms, they would have a lot of explaining to do.

"What've you got there?" asked Ron as Harry returned.

"Photo album." Harry flipped it open and started paging through it, looking for a particular one... "There."

He'd chosen a picture of his mother working at her desk, candlelight shimmering off her dark red hair. He peered at the letter she was writing, trying to compare the writing in the picture with the writing on the parchment in his hand.

"You think your mum invented this?" said Hermione, sounding totally disbelieving.

“That’s what Letha said when she heard the spell.” The two examples of handwriting were similar, but not the same... he needed something else...

He flipped through the pages, then stopped suddenly as something came to him. Mum was too smart to get herself into trouble. So she wouldn’t have signed her prank work with anything that could be easily traced back to her. But she still would have wanted to take credit for it...

He turned back three pages and found a photo of his parents, inscribed in his father’s spiky handwriting.

JTP + LCE, it read.

“There,” said Harry, stabbing his finger down on the initials. “L.C. Lily... whatever her middle name was. I don’t know it. But it was her. She invented it.”

“Cool,” said Draco, looking at the parchment in Harry’s hand with new respect.

I’ll have to ask Letha what Mum’s middle name was someday, Harry thought as he set the album aside. It was possible that he had known once and simply forgotten, since he knew his father’s quite well. There was just something memorable about the name Tiberius.

A loud bounce a few minutes later signaled Ginny’s arrival in the red bedroom, but she didn’t have anyone’s robes with her when she opened the door. “I couldn’t find them,” she said. “And Myrtle was no help. She’s flooded the whole place, I practically had to wade in. She said someone threw a book at her.”

“Why would anyone want to throw a book at her?” asked Ron. “I mean, other than the obvious, anything that gets her to shut up is all to the good, but throwing things at her just makes her mad, and then she cries more than usual.”

“Circular logic,” remarked Draco. “You dazzle me, Ron.”

“Shut up,” grumbled Ron.

“I found the book,” said Ginny, displaying a small, black-covered book. “Dried it with my wand, it was soaking. It looks like a diary.”

“Why would someone throw away their diary?” asked Hermione.

“Maybe if they didn’t want anyone to read it,” said Draco. “Whose is it, Ginny? Any way to tell?”

“There’s no name on it,” said Ginny. “And it looks old. Look at this date.” She handed it to Harry.

“That’s fifty years ago,” said Harry after some brief mental arithmetic.

Ron guffawed. “So someone left a diary sitting around for fifty years, then threw it at a ghost?”

“I’m going to see if there’s a name or anything inside it,” said Harry.

“Don’t!” said Ron and Ginny together.

Harry looked up, startled.

“Don’t what?” asked Luna, drawn from Meghan’s story by the noise.

“Harry’s going to open a book,” explained Ron.

“I knew you didn’t like to read, but that’s no reason to stop other people doing it, is it, Ronald?” asked Luna reasonably.

“No, it’s not that,” said Ron, ears going faintly pink. “But Dad’s told some weird stories about books. One that made you speak in bad poetry for the rest of your life, and one that you couldn’t stop reading, so you had to try to do everything with one hand and without looking at it...”

“But no one would keep a dangerous book at Hogwarts,” said Hermione reasonably.

"Maybe it's just turned dangerous," suggested Meghan. "So that's why someone tried to get rid of it."

"Whose side are you on?" demanded Harry. "Look, I'm going to open it. If something bad happens to me, shut it up and go get Padfoot or Letha, all right?"

He flipped the cover of the book open.

Nothing happened. Ginny sighed in relief. Ron shrugged. "Well, it could have been," he said to no one in particular.

"There's a name in here," said Harry. "T. M. Riddle." He flipped through it. "But all the rest of it is blank."

"Can I see?" asked Neville. Harry handed it over. Neville held the diary in his hands for a moment, opened it once, then handed it quickly back. "Thanks," he said.

"What's wrong?" asked Ron. "Did it hurt you or something?"

"No. I just don't like it much."

"Neville, it's a blank diary," said Harry, laughing a little. "Bought in Vauxhall Road." He displayed the name of the shop, inside the back cover. "What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know. I just don't like it."

"Pearl, do you want to see it?"

Meghan shook her head. "If Neville doesn't like it, I don't either," she said loyally.

"Anyone else?" asked Harry.

They all took turns holding the diary, flipping through it, looking at it. Hermione tried a couple of spells on it, to see if there might be secret messages written in it, but nothing happened. Finally it came back to Ginny.

"I'll just hold onto it for a while," she said, tucking it away in a pocket of her day robes, which she hadn't yet changed for her nightdress. "It's obvious no one wants it, if they tried to flush it down a toilet."

The conversation turned to other topics, and no one noticed Draco slipping away to the green bedroom.

"Alex, you around?"

"No, I'm in Antarctica." Alex emerged from behind his chair. "What can I do for The-Boy-Who-Isn't-A-Malfoy?"

"The first thing you can do is stop calling me that. I wanted to show you something."

"Show away."

Draco hiked up his robes. Alex yelped and hid his face. "My virgin eyes!"

"Cut that out," said Draco. "Here, look." He held out his hand, his dagger lying across the palm.

Alex looked, and looked again. "Wow. Where did you get that? Goblin-made, isn't it?"

Draco nodded. "They're from Aunt Amy. Christmas gifts."

"Gee, I wish I had an Aunt Amy who could give me a goblin-wrought dagger for Christmas," sing-songed Alex. "Did you all get one?"

"All four of us."

"Four? Oh, just you cubs. Right?"

"Right."

Alex scratched his nose, thinking. "Might have to do something about that," he said to himself. "But not for a while yet... all right, so what do you want from me?"

"What makes you think I want something from you?"

"Do you want the full list, or just a partial?"

"Partial's fine."

"You never come in here unless you want something. You're an Heir of the House of Slytherin, which means you always want something. And you have that look on your face which means you want something. Enough?"

"Yes."

"So what do you want?"

"Just to ask a couple of questions." Draco lounged on the bed. "These are very nice to have around," he said casually, rubbing a finger across the green pommel stone. "They might save our lives someday. If we can hang onto them."

"True."

"Though I suppose the same could be said of our pendants. That they could save our lives. But we don't have to worry about hanging onto them. They go intangible when we want them to, so no one can take them away from us."

Alex nodded suspiciously.

"Wouldn't it be nice," Draco finished, "if there was some way to turn our daggers intangible when we wanted? So we'd always have at least one weapon on us, one no one could take away?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

"Is there some way to do that?"

"Are you asking if I can do it?"

"That'll do to start."

"Yes, I can."

"Will you?"

Alex shook his head. "That would be direct interference," he said. "Prohibited except in very special circumstances. Which these aren't."

Draco nodded. "Is there any other way it could be done?"

Alex grinned. "That's my boy."

"There is?"

"There is. But it requires a sacrifice from you."

"Sacrifice?" Draco looked apprehensively at the painting. "Like what?"

"Oh, not a pound of flesh or anything stupid like that," said Alex. "Have you ever wondered what those pretty jewels on your pendants are for?"

"They're for telling us what House we're Heirs to. Right?"

"Yes."

Draco sensed that he was being prompted. "What else do they do?"

"Well..." Alex seemed to be pondering how to put it. "They can either temporarily confer upon other things the property of your pendants that was contributed by that particular House," he said finally, "or they can temporarily enhance and augment your pendants' existing qualities from that House."

Draco sorted through this. "You gave the pendants intangibility. So my green jewels could turn our daggers intangible, couldn't they?"

“Yes. For a while.”

“That’s right, you said temporarily. What if I want it to be permanent?”

Alex frowned. “Well... I suppose if you were willing to use two of them. They’re one use only, you understand, so if you do this, you’ll only have one left. Plus the Gryffindor one.”

“Whatever good that is,” said Draco dryly. “All right. That seems fair. Two Slytherin jewels to make all four of our daggers, and the belts and sheaths, permanently intangible to anyone we want them to be intangible to, the same way our pendants are. Am I forgetting anything?”

“I don’t think so.” Alex grinned. “Just say the magic words.”

“So I speak, so I intend,” said Draco, lifting his right hand.

“And so let it be done,” answered Alex.

Draco pulled out his pendants. Two of the green gems were glowing with a fierce light, pulsing, getting brighter and brighter, until he had to look away. A final flash seemed to etch his shadow on the opposite wall.

“Is that it?” he asked, looking back at Alex.

“Give it a try.”

Draco willed himself not to be able to touch his dagger and made a grab for it.

His hand passed through.

“Fall through the bed,” he told it.

The dagger disappeared, and he heard it clatter on the floor underneath.

“Cool.” Draco ducked under the bed to retrieve his weapon and sheathed it, then stood up and looked at the portrait again. “Thanks, Alex.”

“Anytime, Draco.”

“Wow, you actually know my name. I’m so impressed.”

“Smarmy brat,” said Alex. “Your parents have my sympathies.”

Draco stuck out his tongue and returned to the main room.

(A/N: Well, for me, this update took a while, didn’t it? I hope it’s long, and satisfying, enough to make up for that.

Please do what I always want you to do, and think kindly of me, trapped at home with my terrifying family for another week. (They’re not really so bad. But I have to complain a little. It’s tradition.) I love you all!)

Chapter 31: This IS Normal

Aletha marked the last of the parchments in her stack with a nine out of ten and set it on the other side of her desk, then checked her watch. It was almost four o'clock. There were no more classes today, and she wouldn't be expected anywhere for at least two hours.

She pulled out a spare piece of parchment, dipped her quill, and scribbled a note.

Out for a while, back by dinner. AFB

There was already a fire going in her grate. It was a simple matter to add Floo powder and step in.

"The Marauders' Den!"

"How do women in normal families stand it?" asked Aletha a few minutes later, taking out teacups.

"Stand what?" Danger turned from filling the teakettle.

"Being the only mother their children have. It's exhausting."

"Well, other women have a number of advantages." Danger came over with the kettle in her hands and poured the already boiling water over the teabags. "Number one, most of them are used to it. Number two, most of them have some space between their children, rather than three all the same age and one desperately trying to be. And number three, most of them don't have to deal with things like their children's friends dying and their schoolmates getting Petrified, at least not all at once."

Aletha laughed. She loved working at Hogwarts, but she did miss the easy camaraderie of the Den, where everything was a joke except their love for one another.

I can always pop home for a little while. Like this.

"You know you can always call on us if you get worn out," said Danger, echoing Aletha's thoughts. "Come home for a bit, just to rest

up. Hogwarts strikes me as a very busy place. Always something happening, or someone wanting to make something happen. You need a rest from that sometimes.”

Aletha blew on her tea. “I might be taking you up on that more often now,” she said. “Things are starting to heat up. You heard about the Hufflepuff boy and Nearly Headless Nick?”

“We heard. That’s bizarre, that it could happen even to a ghost. And no one has any idea what it could be?”

“None. There’s been some talk, but so far it’s only talk, thank heaven, about Albus being suspended.”

“Oh, please.” Danger snorted. “Sure, the school’s having troubles, so let’s take away their best defense. Wouldn’t it be smarter just to close the place? Not that I’m in favor of that, mind you,” she added hastily, “but wouldn’t that be a better idea?”

Aletha sighed. “That’s also been brought up.”

“Damn.”

The two women sat in silence.

“And then, of course, there’s the talk about Harry being the Heir of Slytherin,” said Aletha finally.

“Which he could still be,” said Danger, cradling her teacup in her hands. “We just don’t know. And it is a valid question. How else could he be a Parselmouth?”

“It could have something to do with Voldemort,” said Aletha. “But damned if I know what.”

“Am I allowed to register a guess, or is this ladies’ tea only?” asked Remus from the doorway.

“Oh, if you must, I suppose,” said Danger, sounding bored.

"Hello, Letha, good to see you." Remus clasped her hand briefly, then tugged on a tendril of her hair. Aletha slapped his hand away playfully.

"Should I be worried here?" asked Danger, her mouth stern but her eyes lively.

"Simply being brotherly, my only love."

"If that's brotherly, what's romantic?"

Remus came around the table. "This." He lifted Danger from her chair, sat down in it himself, pulled her onto his lap, and demonstrated romantic. Aletha looked at an interesting shadow on the ceiling and sipped her tea, smiling to herself.

About some things, it seems, our cubs will never have to worry. Such as their parents losing interest in one another.

Just out of curiosity, she kept track of the time on her watch. "Thirty-three seconds," she said when she could see both their faces again.

"Oh, is that all?" Danger looked disappointed. "We must be out of practice. We used to be able to keep it up for a solid minute."

"You're fantasizing again, dear," said Remus gently. "I distinctly remember a ninety-second session or two."

Aletha nearly snorted tea across the table. "You're horrible," she said when she could speak again.

"I've made a lifelong study of it." Remus gave a little bow. "Weren't you talking about something else when I came in?"

"Yes, but it's not interesting," said Danger.

"On the contrary, I think it is. It was Harry, and how he speaks Parseltongue."

Aletha nodded. "And whether or not that means he's the Heir of Slytherin."

"It might mean that he's descended from Slytherin," said Danger, "but I'm as sure as I am of my own name that he's not opening any Chamber of Secrets and attacking people. That has to be someone else. Someone wanting to pin it on him, maybe."

"But then why would they go to the trouble to kill his snake first?" Remus frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"Maybe that was meant as a warning," said Aletha. "But we stopped it from being one, since we kept Siss' death quiet. I still don't think anyone knows about it except us, Albus, Minerva, Snape, and Percy Weasley."

"So they started out wanting to warn him, then decided to try to pin it on him?" Danger shook her head. "Who makes plans that complicated?"

"Not complicated," said Remus. "Just changing with the times. Adapting. Flexible. But we're off topic again."

"No, we're not," Danger contradicted. "We're perfectly on the topic we're talking about. We're just not on the one you want to talk about."

"And thus, we're off topic."

"Because you say we are."

"Now you're starting to understand it."

Danger shook her head. "Men."

"And who else are you including in that?"

Danger smacked Remus on the shoulder.

"Thanks, I needed that. What I was going to say was, Harry's scar hurt him last year, when he was near Voldemort. What if the scar connects them in some way?"

Aletha thought about that for a moment. "If that's true," she said finally, "then Harry gets his Parseltongue from Voldemort, who is an Heir of Slytherin, most likely. So that would mean Harry probably isn't. Or at least that he doesn't have to be."

"I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear that," said Remus, smiling. Aletha arrived in the Great Hall for dinner feeling refreshed.

"You look happy," said Sirius, passing down a tureen of soup. "Been having some fun this afternoon?"

"Yes. A great deal."

"Where were you?"

"Home."

"Back at the Den?"

"No, in my other secret home that I don't tell you about. Yes, back at the Den."

Sirius groaned, dropping his spoon into his bowl. "You have to tell me when you're going to do that, Letha."

Aletha stared at him, offended. "Since when do I have to report my movements to you, Sirius Black? I'm fully able to take care of myself, you know."

"That wasn't what I meant!"

"Then you'd better explain what you did mean right away."

Sirius put on his best puppy-dog eyes. "I meant I wanted to go with you."

Aletha laughed, her anger gone. "Poor Sirius, left all alone at Hogwarts with just the mean nasty old Potions Master for company."

“No, I mean it. I’d like to pop home and see Remus and Danger, but Moony’d tease me if I went alone. If I tag along with you, I can claim you made me come.”

Aletha shook her head. “Your matter-of-factness never ceases to amaze me. Shall we go for tea tomorrow, then?”

“Oh, if you insist,” said Sirius in a long-suffering tone.

“Out of the way, there,” barked a voice. “Move aside. The wizard’s in a hurry.”

“Way for His Royal Evilness,” added another voice, almost identical to the first. “Clear a path for the one and only Heir of Slytherin!”

Harry glared at Fred and George, who were parting the crowd in the hall with grand, sweeping gestures. “Just wait until summer,” he said. “You’re going to regret this.”

But he really didn’t mind Fred and George messing about in the halls. It meant that they, at least, thought the idea of his being the Heir of Slytherin was completely insane.

It was an attitude he appreciated more and more as term went on and more people seemed to be considering it seriously. The whispering as he passed, instead of dying down, seemed to get worse. Peeves, of course, wasn’t helping. He was still singing “Oh, Potter, you rotter”, and he had invented a dance routine to go with it. Harry was relatively safe in classes, but in the hallways in between times he was fair game.

Percy Weasley was occasionally helpful – he’d had more practice at getting rid of Peeves – but more often not, as he tried to overawe Fred and George with his status as a prefect.

You’d think he’d have figured out by now it doesn’t work, thought Harry one day, as Percy bellowed at George for pretending to ward Harry off with a braided string of garlic. And maybe I should tell him I don’t mind them. But he’d probably just say something like, “It’s not about if you mind, Harry, they’re messing with the way everything is supposed to go, and I’m a prefect, so I have to tell them off.”

“Percy?”

“Yes?” Percy turned to Harry. George tipped him a wink, tossed a handful of garlic skin into the air over Percy’s head, stuck it there with his wand, and fled.

“I don’t really mind them when they do that. They’re just having fun.”

“It doesn’t matter if you mind them, Harry,” explained Percy a tad huffily. “They’re disrupting the normal process of the school day, and it’s my job as a school prefect to keep everything running as smoothly as possible in these troubled times.”

“All right.” Well, I was close.

Percy turned to walk away, and the papery garlic skin in the air above him came unstuck and showered down around him, startling him into a yelp.

“Sorry, I’m late,” said Harry quickly, and ran in the opposite direction before Percy could see that he was laughing.

A few days before the start of February, Meghan was declared fully well again, and fit to return to her duties in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey put her to light work at first, such as dusting the Petrified people. Meghan did this gravely and politely, though she admitted privately that her fingers itched to see if she could un-Petrify them herself.

“You’re not to try it,” said Aletha firmly. “Your powers are for emergencies only, and this is not an emergency. They’re in no danger of dying, and we know precisely how to revive them. If you can’t keep your hands to yourself, we can find other places for you to work in the castle.”

Meghan assured her mother she’d be good. “Can I use it for little things?” she asked. “Just to see what I can do with it?”

“Why don’t you wait a few days,” said Aletha. “I got an owl from Andy this morning. She’ll be here on Thursday to watch you work.”

"But I have to practice, then," objected Meghan, keeping her face straight. "So I'll look good."

"The point of this is not to look good, you silly mooncalf!" Aletha pulled her daughter closer to her on the couch and tickled her mercilessly.

"Hey, hey, hey, break it up," said Sirius, coming into the room. "Give me a chance." He sat down between his women and tickled both of them, one with each hand. He soon regretted this, as they ganged up on him.

"What is the point, then?" asked Meghan when they were recovering their breath afterwards.

"The point of what?" asked Sirius.

"Andy's coming to watch her heal," explained Aletha. "The point, silly Pearl, is for a trained Healer to see you working and figure out, if she can, what you do and what would and wouldn't be safe for you."

"To be completely honest, if she can save someone's life, I don't see what wouldn't be safe for her," said Andy over tea, Meghan safely out of the room. "I understand it required a long recovery time, but so would any hard work. She can certainly do small things without too much strain on herself."

At Andromeda's request, Meghan had healed all the small injuries that came into the hospital wing over the course of a morning. These had included two scraped knees, a badly bruised arm, several burns, and a broken nose.

"It shouldn't overtax her, not with what she's already shown herself capable of," she explained. "And since you already know it takes her a couple of months to recover fully from a truly major healing, it would be nice to know how long it will take for her to get over healing little injuries like these."

The house-elves, who were treating Meghan like royalty these days, had kept her supplied with spiced heated pumpkin juice, and

delivered a large lunch to the hospital wing almost as soon as Andy called a halt to the experiment. Meghan had eaten ravenously, then climbed into Sirius' lap and fallen asleep. He'd held her for a little while as Andromeda and Aletha talked business, then laid her on one of the hospital wing beds, told Madam Pomfrey she was there, and left with the two women for the privacy of the Defense teachers' office.

"Question," said Sirius now. "What do you think about Meghan using this power as if it were an everyday thing? Could she overtire herself, just using it in little dribs and drabs this way, until she got into serious trouble and we didn't notice?"

Andy tapped her fingers on the table. "It's possible," she said slowly, "but I think unlikely at this point. She has a wise body – you saw how she would stop and drink when she needed it, and eat and sleep when she needed that."

"But there's another side to the problem," said Aletha. "She's just a little girl. Should she be routinely using a power that no one else in recorded history has demonstrated in over a thousand years?"

Andy shrugged. "She's got to get used to it at some point," she said, "but I don't think it's the best of ideas for her to be showing it off and tossing it around. That's a perfect way for her to start thinking she can do anything, and the last thing she needs is a swelled head. And she might be more likely than usual to get one, if it runs in families."

"That's not fair," protested Sirius. "Letha's never been one to get puffed up."

The women exchanged a tolerant look. "If she can use it without anyone realizing, I'd say she should be clear to," said Andromeda. "But only on small things, and put a limit on it. Two or three per day, perhaps, and she has to have a drink in between and a snack and a nap afterwards."

"Poppy would be glad to make sure she does that," said Aletha. "And she should also be good at disguising what's really happened. I take it you agree this should stay secret for a while."

“Oh, most certainly.” Andy chuckled. “Your family gives me all my most interesting cases. A werewolf who isn’t really a werewolf, except that he still changes at full moons, and now a blood Heir of Rowena Ravenclaw. Nice work covering up how she saved Harry, by the way. However did you get Poppy to agree to say she’d made a mistake?”

Sirius grinned. “She was so relieved that Harry wasn’t actually going to die that I think she would have agreed to anything. And so far, no one’s made the connection between Harry’s recovery and Meghan’s illness.”

“We said she’d picked up a nasty bug that was resistant to common potions,” said Aletha, “and we were inclined to let her recover on her own rather than dose her up. Having the holidays so close helped as well, and of course, there’s her not being a student, so she doesn’t have classes and regular duties. People do notice if she’s not around, but they just assume she’s off doing something else, something she likes better.”

“Then they obviously don’t know her very well,” said Andromeda. “I have a feeling there’s nowhere she likes being better than that hospital wing.”

Anyone who didn’t know Aletha as well as he did, Sirius thought, would never have been able to tell that her smile was just the least bit forced. Something was on her mind.

He shrugged. He wasn’t a prying man. If she wanted to talk, she knew where he was. He wouldn’t interfere unless things started going out of control, like they had last year after Halloween.

What is it with Halloween, anyway? Does everything bad happen then? First James and Lily, then that troll, now Harry’s snake...

Andy’s laughter brought him back to the present. There was no need to be superstitious, he told himself. Plenty of bad things happened on days that weren’t Halloween, and plenty of good things happened on the day itself.

“So I’d say, let her use it in small ways, and keep an eye on her,” said Andromeda as she prepared to leave. “And I wouldn’t say this for most other children her age, but trust her judgment. Not completely, of course, but in some respects. She’s likely to have an instinct for which cases need her and which ones would do better with potions and such.”

Aletha smiled, accepting the compliment for Meghan. “Thank you so much, Andy,” she said, embracing the other woman. “It’s been such a help to have you around.”

“Anytime you need me, just firecall,” said Andromeda. “See you around, ugly cousin.” She slapped Sirius on the shoulder before departing through the fireplace.

“Harry, wait up!”

Harry turned at the shout. Ginny came trotting up to him, panting a little. “Merlin, you walk fast,” she said, holding out a quill. “You dropped this.”

“Thanks.” Harry took it. “Where are you headed?”

“Back to the Tower. You?”

“Same. Walk with me?”

“Sure.”

They walked down the hall together. Harry noticed Ginny was still breathing hard. “Let me take that,” he said, lifting her schoolbag from her shoulder. “It looks heavy.”

“Thanks.” Ginny blushed a little. “It’s just that I have Transfiguration and Charms both today, and those are the biggest books we have. I miss Colin in Charms. We used to sit next to each other, did you know?”

Harry shook his head. “I hate Herbology, though,” he said. “The Hufflepuffs all keep huddling together and whispering whenever I come in.”

“People are so stupid,” said Ginny as they came to a staircase. “If they’d just open their eyes, they’d see you can’t possibly be the Heir of Slytherin.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, thinking hard of ice water as he felt the heat of a flush on his own cheeks. “Listen, Ginny, are you doing anything tonight?”

Ginny stumbled and fell. Harry bent to help her up, but she waved him away, and stood after a moment on her own, her face now very red indeed. “No, I don’t think so,” she said quietly without looking at him. “Why?”

“It’s Padfoot’s birthday today. We’re going to have a party down in the kitchens and make fun of him until he starts hexing us. I was just wondering if you wanted to come.”

“A birthday party for Professor Black?” Ginny’s smile, as she finally turned to look at Harry, was exceedingly bright and cheerful. “I’d love to come. When is it?”

“It starts at seven. We’re all meeting in the Great Hall after dinner to walk down together. Will I see you there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Ginny’s smile wavered a little but remained in place.

“Oh-ho-HO!” bellowed a familiar voice from above them. Harry and Ginny looked up to see Peeves floating there, leering down. “Potty lurves the little Weaslette, does he? Watch out, widdle girly, or he’ll attack you and make you all bloody – like this!”

Harry saw just in time what Peeves was about to do, and leapt in front of Ginny to catch the inkwell himself. The added weight of Ginny’s bag made him bobble the catch, and red ink spilled over his robes and into the bags. He swore.

“Potty-mouth Potter,” cackled Peeves in satisfaction, and rocketed away, screeching, “Potty has a Valentine! Widdle Weaslette is Potty’s Valentine!”

Harry felt his face go as red as the ink. He’d completely forgotten what else Padfoot’s birthday meant.

But everyone knows what Peeves says is rubbish anyway...

I hope...

“I’m sorry about your bag,” he said, turning around, determined not to react to what Peeves was trying to do.

“It’s all right. We can fix it.” Ginny drew her wand, her face carefully neutral as she looked only at Harry’s chest. “Scourgify.” The ink on Harry’s robes vanished. “Spread the books out,” she instructed. “It’s easier if I can see what I’m doing.”

Harry opened her bag and his and began pulling out one ink-soaked book after another, putting them in piles of more and less inky. The last book out of Ginny’s bag wasn’t inky at all, so he set it off by itself. “This one didn’t get it,” he said, showing her the small, black book. “It must have been at the bottom.”

“But the bag’s all covered with it – look.” Ginny showed him where the ink had run down the sides of her bag, pooling inside at the bottom and dripping onto the carpet. “It should have gotten more inky at the bottom, not less.”

Harry shook his head. “Strange.”

Ginny nodded and began casting Cleaning Charms, first on the two bags, then on the piles of books. As she dealt with the puddle on the carpet, Harry noticed something odd. There were tiny specks of red off to one side, as if something had tracked through the ink and left footprints. But what could leave footprints that small?

Ginny looked where he was looking. “What is that?”

"I don't know." Harry traced an imaginary path with his finger. If the thing had kept going the direction it had been going, it would have gone...

He looked up on the wall, and there, sure enough, was a large and magnificent spider, scurrying along as though possessed. It still had traces of ink visible on it.

"Can you catch it?" said Ginny quietly in his ear. "I don't know if the ink's poisonous to it or not, but I don't want it to die if it is."

Harry cupped his hands around the spider, which froze in place. Ginny removed the ink from it, Harry let it go, and they both watched it run along the wall and out of sight.

Suddenly Harry remembered something. He checked his watch and swore again. "Ginny, I'm sorry, I just remembered, I have Quidditch practice – I have to run – see you in the Great Hall at six-fifty?"

"Of course."

Harry scooped his books into his bag and ran for the Tower. Padfoot's birthday party was a great success. Moony and Danger came from home to celebrate with them, the house-elves provided a splendid cake and plenty of other good things to eat, and the Pride did, indeed, manage to tease Padfoot into hexing them. He gave Ron a splendid pair of donkey ears and Harry a lion's mane, and threatened to leave them on all night and make the boys go to class that way in the morning unless they apologized.

"We're very sorry, Professor Black," said Ron earnestly.

Harry nodded hard. "We didn't mean to say that you couldn't cast a spell to save your life."

"They meant you couldn't cast a spell to save anyone's life," called Draco from across the room, where he was playing Gobstones with Luna, Neville, Meghan, and two or three house-elves.

“Well, maybe not to save a life,” said Padfoot lazily, “but I was reckoned a fair target shooter in my day.” A flick of his wand removed ears and mane from Ron and Harry and conferred them both on Draco.

Luna reached over and stroked the ears. “Will you roar so loudly that you fright the ladies?” she asked.

Draco blushed and didn’t answer.

Ginny excused herself early, pleading a headache, and thanked Meghan for her offer to heal it, but said she’d rather go and rest instead. Meghan pouted for a little while, until Hermione, with the ease of long practice, tricked her sister out of her bad mood by asking her silly questions until she laughed.

At one point Harry found himself alone with Danger, and decided to ask her what he had intended to ask Letha. “Do you know what my mum’s middle name was?”

Danger frowned. “Not off the top of my head... wait a moment.” She closed her eyes, as if she was thinking hard, but Harry knew she was probably asking Moony. “Cecilia,” she said. “Lily Cecilia.”

“Thanks.”

“Why did you ask?”

“Found an old picture with their initials on it, and I just wondered.”

“All right. Be polite with it, now that you know. Names have a lot of power.” Danger opened her eyes and looked directly at him. She knew he loved to watch her eyes change, from the blue-brown swirl they were when she and Moony were in full contact, so mingled that no one could tell what color they had originally been, back to her usual frank brown, with just the occasional tinge of blue, which might have been totally natural and normal, except that it wasn’t.

Just like everything else around here.

Harry grinned. He rather liked not being normal. Normal, in his opinion, was highly overrated.

It was in a good mood that he said good night to Padfoot at the portrait hole and climbed through, the rest of the Pride behind him, Draco de-maned and de-eared because he'd asked politely, or rather begged, Harry thought with a snicker.

Ginny was sitting by herself off to one side, eyes fixed on the entrance, obviously waiting for them. She beckoned them over as soon as she saw them.

"What's wrong?" asked Ron, seeing the troubled expression on her face.

"Not here." Ginny looked around. "Somewhere else." Her eyes landed on the fireplace.

One by one they slid down the stone slide, until they were all established in the red bedroom. "Is something wrong, Ginny?" asked Draco as he climbed off the bed. "You look upset."

Ginny led the way into the main room, where she produced a small, black book from her pocket. It was the diary she'd found in Myrtle's bathroom, and, Harry realized suddenly, the book that hadn't gotten soaked by the ink Peeves had thrown at her.

"You remember this?" she asked.

Everyone nodded.

"It's magical. It has a boy's memories in it. His name was Tom Riddle. And he was at Hogwarts the last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened."

"The last time?" said two or three people at once.

"That's right!" said Neville suddenly. "Professor Dumbledore said – that night I went out, the night Colin was attacked – he said the

Chamber had been opened once more. That means it was opened before!"

"Fifty years ago," said Ginny. "Several people were attacked. A girl died. And Tom Riddle caught the person who was doing it. They gave him a Special Award for Services to the School."

"He deserved it," said Harry. "Did he tell you who it was?"

Ginny looked at her hands. "Yes."

"Tell us," urged Hermione. "Please."

"You won't like it."

"Just tell us!" said Ron impatiently.

"Hagrid."

There was a long silence.

Draco gave a forced little laugh. "That's funny," he said. "That's really funny. Hagrid, Heir of Slytherin. Come on, who was it?"

"That's who it was, Draco. I'm not lying."

"But that doesn't make sense," said Meghan, voicing what everyone was thinking. "Hagrid wouldn't attack people. He's nice."

"There's supposed to be a monster in the Chamber," said Luna. "And Hagrid likes monsters. He had a three-headed dog, and he'd like to have a dragon."

"And he might have let the monster out," said Ron. He imitated Hagrid's voice. "'Jus' ter let him stretch his legs a bit.' And then it might have gotten away from him..."

"But more than one person was attacked," said Hermione. "He wouldn't have taken it out again, if it got away from him the first time, would he?"

“He might’ve,” argued Ron. “He might’ve thought the first time was just a fluke.”

“Oh, come on, Ron, even Hagrid’s not that stupid!”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

Harry tuned out Ron and Hermione’s argument, as well as the conversation about monsters, which had turned into a discussion of what sort of monster might be in the Chamber, that it could Petrify people. Luna kept coming out with odd suggestions, which Draco politely found reasons to deny, while Neville and Meghan debated about whether it might not be a vegetable monster which produced some sort of poison that only the Heir could safely use. Harry really didn’t care, so long as someone found a way to stop it before it actually killed someone.

Ginny looked miserable, Harry noticed. He knew she liked Hagrid almost as much as the cubs of the Pack did, but he had never really thought about it until now. “How do you work the diary?” he asked conversationally.

Ginny gave him a small smile. “Come on, I’ll show you.” She got up and opened the door into the library, where she uncorked an inkpot on the desk and dipped a quill. “This is why it didn’t get any ink on it,” she explained. “It soaks it up. And then Tom writes back using it.”

She began to write on the first page. Harry read over her shoulder.

“Hello, Tom. It’s Ginny again. I’ve brought someone to meet you.”

Ginny lifted the quill away. The letters gleamed on the page for a moment, then faded into the paper as if they’d never been there. Harry stared as the ink came oozing back to the surface, forming first letters, then words, in a very precise, old-fashioned handwriting.

“Hello, Ginny. Hello, Ginny’s friend. My name is Tom Riddle.”

Harry took the quill Ginny held out to him and dipped it himself. "Hello, Tom," he scribbled down. "My name is Harry Potter."

Riddle's response came up quickly. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Harry. I've heard a great deal about you."

Ginny blushed. Harry refrained from looking at her. "Are you sure of what you told Ginny about the Chamber of Secrets?" he asked Riddle instead.

"Positive. I can show you the same way I showed her, if you like. I can take you inside my memory to let you see the night I caught the culprit."

Harry glanced at Ginny, who nodded. "It doesn't hurt," she said. "It's like being a ghost, almost. You get to watch everything, but no one can see or hear you."

Harry dipped his quill again. "All right."

Harry's heart was pounding when he returned to the main room of the Den. Everyone looked up at him. He nodded slowly. "Hagrid," he said.

Hermione made a sound that could only be described as a yowl. Draco twisted a pillow between his hands, with a look that made Harry grateful it wasn't somebody's neck.

"He's wrong," said Meghan. "He has to be wrong."

Harry sighed. "Pearl, I saw it. Hagrid was trying to smuggle the monster out of the castle. But it got away. It must have run back into the Chamber."

"You're wrong," said Meghan fiercely. "You and that stupid book." She pointed at it, in Ginny's hands. "Hagrid wouldn't put people in danger. Go and ask him. He'll tell you he never."

"Pearl, he'd say that whether or not he really did," said Draco unhappily.

Meghan bared her teeth briefly. "You're all stupid. Believing some dumb book over Hagrid. He's our friend. He helped us catch Wormtail. I'm not talking to any of you." She stomped into the red bedroom and slammed the door.

"I'll go after her," said Neville quickly.

"Don't worry too much," advised Draco. "She gets like this sometimes. She'll get over it."

Neville nodded and slipped into the red bedroom.

The doors of the Hogwarts Den blocked sound fairly well, and the remaining six warriors of the Pride were all talking. If two people who had supposedly left the Den actually did not, but remained in one of the rooms and had a quiet, intense talk, the six were unlikely to notice.

They did notice, however, that Meghan kept her opinions a bit more to herself than she usually did during the debates which emerged over the next months, most of which, funnily enough, centered around something Meghan had brought up. Should they, or should they not, go and ask Hagrid if Tom Riddle's story were true?

Ron and Draco, for once, were on the same side about something. They both insisted that Hagrid would maintain his innocence whether or not the story were true. Hermione, in the face of all opposition, declared that Hagrid was their friend and would tell them the truth because he wouldn't want them to be hurt, but she wouldn't say what she thought the truth was.

"It's all too complicated," she said one evening with a sigh, falling into an armchair. "I don't know who to believe." They had checked out Riddle's story that he'd received a Special Award for Services to the School. His golden shield was indeed in the trophy room, though they'd had to search a bit, as it was hidden inside a cabinet in the corner, along with a Medal for Magical Merit and a list of Head Boys with dates around the year printed on the diary, both of which featured Riddle's name in prominent places. This had swayed Ron a bit towards believing in Hagrid's innocence, since it seemed to plant Riddle firmly in the "Percy" category, personality-wise.

Luna, like Meghan and Neville, kept her opinions to herself, and Harry simply didn't know what to think. He wanted to believe that Hagrid would never do something like that, but he had seen the memory, had seen the younger Hagrid tackle Riddle as the huge monster escaped down the passage. He found himself looking at Ginny a lot as the discussions went around and around in the evenings, and finding understanding in her brown eyes. She, too, had seen it. She knew what was going on in his mind.

"Look, why don't we put it off until after vacation?" he suggested one night, half in desperation – they'd been talking this to death for nearly a month and a half, and they were no closer to a solution than they had been before. "No one's going to get attacked if the castle's half empty. And no one's been attacked since January. So why don't we just wait?"

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would do. Everyone agreed to wait and see.

The cubs went home for Easter, and brought lists of classes with them. It was time to choose new subjects for third year.

"None of you need Muggle Studies," said Danger surely. "Not with the way we've been living."

"Oh, but it would be so interesting!" objected Hermione. "Looking at Muggles the way wizards do, from the outside instead of the inside..."

"I'm not forbidding it, but you only have room for three subjects at most, Neenie love." Danger caught her sister's hand as Hermione aimed a half-hearted slap at her. "I wouldn't. I'm bigger, and I hit back. Besides, we're in den, remember? Nobody here but just us Marauders."

Hermione settled for a growl before crossing off Muggle Studies on her sheet.

"Don't take Divination, either," said Padfoot. "I've met the teacher. You wouldn't care for it at all."

"What's he like?" asked Draco.

"She, it's a she, her name's Sibyll Trelawney. She's..." Padfoot frowned, trying to come up with words to describe her.

"Flaky," said Letha flatly, coming up behind him.

"That'll do." Padfoot turned back to the cubs. "She wears enough shawls and ugly jewelry to outfit a brigade of grandmothers," he said. "And she's convinced she knows everything, and goes about predicting disaster. Oh yes, and she doesn't think much of books."

Hermione made a noise of disapproval and buried her nose in the course list again. "What exactly do you study in Ancient Runes?" she asked.

"Ancient Runes," quipped Padfoot.

"Har har," said Moony, pulling his chair closer to Hermione's. "It's like those puzzles you love, Hermione. The ones where you have to match the picture with the word. Runes are ancient forms of writing, and you learn to translate them, and figure out both what they say and what they don't."

"What they don't?" repeated Harry.

"The way a thing's said, the way it's phrased, can be almost as important as the words themselves," explained Moony. "Like saying, 'Oh, you look nice today.' The emphasis on the last word turns it from a compliment into an insult, as if you're saying the person doesn't usually look nice."

Draco looked interested at this, and put a small dot of ink next to Ancient Runes on his sheet.

"What's Arithmancy?" asked Harry.

"Now there's something you might care for," said Letha. "The study of the magical properties of numbers. Maths and magic rolled into one."

Harry nodded. He'd always liked maths. "What numbers have magical properties?" he asked.

"Well, all numbers do, really," said Letha, sitting down. "But certain ones have more. Seven, twelve, and thirteen are the most commonly used magical numbers, since they're the smallest. I mean, it's hard to get six hundred sixteen of anything together, no matter how powerful it would make you."

Harry laughed at the image that conjured up, and marked Arithmancy as a possible on his own sheet.

"Oh, yes, and I'd definitely recommend Care of Magical Creatures," said Letha to all three of them with a smile. "I think you'll like the professor."

"Kettleburn?" Moony shrugged. "He's all right, I suppose, but I never really warmed up to him. I don't think he liked me much."

"Most teachers don't care for students who know more than they do," confided Padfoot to the cubs behind his hand.

Moony pretended he hadn't heard this.

"Mama Letha!" called Meghan's voice from the potions room, where she was working on something. "Dadfoot! Come see what I did!"

Padfoot and Letha smiled at each other and got up, arms going around one another's waists. Harry caught Draco's eye and made a gagging face. Draco nodded. It was nice to know their Pack-parents liked each other, but did they have to get mushy right in front of everyone?

"How's Quidditch going, boys?" asked Moony, giving them the "stop messing around" look.

"Fair enough," said Harry. "Wood's working us pretty hard, but he's confident we can beat Hufflepuff. They haven't changed the team much since last year, and that was the match where I took the speed record."

“Ron and I are off for this one,” said Draco. “Wood says he might put us in for the last match. But he wants us in the locker room with the team, I guess in case someone gets Petrified last-minute...”

“No one’s going to get Petrified,” said Hermione wearily. “Not unless they’re stupid and go places they shouldn’t. Colin was out of bed late when he shouldn’t have been, Justin left his dorm when he shouldn’t have...”

“Why not?” challenged Harry. “Because that idiot Ernie Macmillan told him not to?”

“Ernie Macmillan isn’t an idiot, Harry!”

“Oh really? He sure acts like one! ‘Caught in the act! Harry Potter did this!’” Harry mimicked Ernie’s overdramatic tones.

“He’s scared. As are we all.”

“Do you want to blame me too, then?” demanded Harry.

“I’m not blaming anyone! I’m just saying I can understand where he’s coming from!”

“Where he’s coming from? Hermione, he thinks I’m a psychopathic killer!”

Hermione drew breath to retort to this, caught sight of the Pack-parents’ faces, and instead flounced out of the room after swatting over her inkwell onto Harry’s sheet of parchment.

Moony and Danger looked at each other, then lifted up their hands and pounded fists onto palms, one, two, three. Moony’s paper covered Danger’s rock, so it was Danger who went after Hermione, while Moony cleaned up the ink. “Don’t take Hermione too seriously right now,” he said. “Come to think of it, don’t take yourselves too seriously. You’re all of you starting to grow up some, and that’s never easy.”

Draco looked at Harry, excitement in his face, which Harry could fully understand. Were they going to get the talk? They'd discussed certain aspects of life with Ron and Neville at den-nights when the girls were doing other things, but they'd never yet had the full disclosure talk they knew they were due for at some point...

But it seemed they were to be disappointed today, as Moony showed no inclination to talk about anything but classes.

Oh, well, Harry signed under the table. There's always next year. Harry and Hermione still weren't quite speaking when they returned to school after break, a fact Draco was careful to inform the rest of the Pride about, quietly. Both of them spent the train ride ignoring each other and talking with everyone else about their new subjects.

Neville and Ron had both chosen Divination and Care of Magical Creatures, and neither seemed inclined to change when Harry and Draco repeated what Padfoot had said about the teacher. "Doesn't like books? That's great," said Ron. "Then she won't be setting massive essays, will she?"

The three cubs had also each chosen Care of Magical Creatures, and Harry and Hermione would be sharing Arithmancy, while Draco and Hermione went into Ancient Runes together. Hermione, for some reason, had also checked off Muggle Studies on her list.

"But you won't have time for it," objected Ron. "You'll be double-booked."

"I'll work something out, I'm sure," said Hermione frostily, and opened a book with such force that no one liked to point out she was reading it upside down.

Once they were all settled back into the Tower, they were about to go outside when Percy Weasley stopped them. "I would like to point out," he said pompously, "that just because there hasn't been an attack in several months, doesn't mean there couldn't be one again. You're still not to go wandering off, understand?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Draco.

"We understand," said Harry for the group, thrusting his heel backwards slightly to contact Draco's shin.

They meandered out to the courtyard and sat in the late afternoon sun, enjoying the unusual warmth of the day.

Ginny broke the silence. "We really ought to go see Hagrid," she said.

"We did say we would after the holidays," said Luna. "And it's after the holidays now."

"But I thought we weren't supposed to 'go wandering off'," said Ron, doing a creditable impression of Percy's voice. "How are we going to get down there without anyone seeing us? The Cloak can't cover us all."

Neville, who had been lying on the stone seat, sat up. "I... I might have an idea," he said hesitantly. "I'm not sure if it will work, though..."

"What is it?" asked Draco, turning to face him.

Neville looked back at Meghan, who nodded eagerly. Clearly she knew what he was about to say or do. "It's something I found out by accident. I have to see if it works again." He closed his eyes and began muttering something. Harry listened, and found his mind suddenly wandering to other things. How nice and blue the sky was, and what the clouds looked like... what was likely to be for dinner...

No, I'm supposed to be watching Neville. He forced his eyes back to Neville, and stared. His friend was gone.

"Where'd he go?" asked Hermione, a bit shrilly.

Meghan giggled. "He's right there." She pointed to a spot where Neville had surely been standing a moment before, but just as surely, he wasn't there now...

Or was he? Harry squinted, and suddenly found himself looking at the top of Gryffindor Tower and thinking about how much fun it might be

to ride his broomstick off it, dive nearly to the grass and swoop upwards again...

"Meghan, he's not there," said Ginny.

"Yes, he is," said Luna, looking steadily at the spot Meghan had pointed to. "But he's made himself hard to see. He's telling everyone that he isn't there, and they believe him."

"Neville?" Hermione got up and approached the place where Neville had been, dubiously. "Are you really there?"

"Here I am," said Neville's voice, and just like that, there he was, a little red in the face, but grinning. "I found it out by accident the night I saw Colin Creevey after he was Petrified. I was afraid I was going to get caught, so I said, 'You can't see me, I'm not here, you can't see me, you don't notice me...'"

As Neville said it, it came true. Harry barely noticed it happening. One second Neville was there, and the next, there was a spot Harry's eyes simply refused to look at.

"Wicked," said Ron, obviously intrigued. "Can you do it for all of us?"

"I think so." Neville reappeared again. "I've never tried it... let me see if it'll just work on Meghan..."

Within a few seconds, Meghan was gone, as if she had never been perched on the broad stone seat that encircled the courtyard.

"It works," said Draco, looking impressed.

"Come on, then," said Harry, getting up. "Whisper us all invisible and let's go."

"Why does he have his curtains pulled?" asked Hermione as they got close enough to Hagrid's house to see this detail.

"Don't know. And look, his chimney's smoking. He must have a fire going." Draco frowned. "But it's been so warm. I hope he's not ill..."

Harry knocked at the door.

“Who is it?” called Hagrid’s voice, sounding rather startled.

“It’s us,” called Harry back.

“Be there in a moment!”

Over the loud noises that followed, Harry whispered to Neville, “Let Hagrid see us, nobody else.”

Neville nodded and began to mutter. “Hagrid can see us, we can see us, nobody else can see us. Nobody else can see us, nobody else notices us, we’re not important to them...”

The door swung open. “Well, hello there,” said Hagrid, beaming down at them. “Come in, come in, bin wonderin’ when yeh’d come down an’ say hello again...”

The Pride trailed into Hagrid’s hut, loosening their collars as they came. Fang’s hackles rose, and he began to growl at them menacingly.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Ron.

Neville flushed slightly and muttered something, and Fang’s demeanor changed at once. He charged at them, barking happily.

“Neville forgot to let Fang see us too,” said Harry under his breath, fending the boarhound off. “But he could still smell us, so he knew something was wrong.”

He looked at Hagrid, always so friendly and so good to them, and felt a wave of uncertainty. Hagrid would surely never have killed anyone...

“It’s hot in here,” complained Meghan. “Why do you have the fire going, Hagrid?”

“Well, I was feelin’ a bit cold,” said Hagrid quickly, setting teacups on the table. “Gettin’ older, yeh know, my joints startin’ t’get stiff...”

But Harry had a feeling this wasn't true at all.

He's lying, whispered an internal voice. If he'd lie to you, why couldn't he have lied to other people? Maybe everything about him is a lie, maybe he's really mean and cruel and he did open the Chamber of Secrets... maybe he's opening it again...

To avoid this line of thought, Harry looked around the cabin, seeking something, anything, with which to open conversation. Then his eyes fell on the fireplace, and he stared.

"Hagrid... what's that?"

(A/N: All right, fellow HP fans, what is it? Give you three guesses, and the first two don't count!

Sorry about the wait, my life's a tad bit unsettled at the moment... I will really try to keep this moving, though, and finish up year 2 before school starts again. I might even manage it. Please encourage me, you know how! Hugs to everyone!)

Chapter 32: Unforgiven

"What's what?" asked Ron, craning his neck to look where Harry was looking. Then he froze, staring. "Hagrid – that's not..."

Hagrid nodded, beaming.

"Wherever did you get it?" asked Hermione, staring too, as was the rest of the Pride.

"I won it." Hagrid poked the fire a bit, piling coals around the enormous black egg. "Down at the Hog's Head las' night. Had a few drinks, a game o' cards..."

"And your opponent just happened to have a dragon egg in his pocket?" said Draco skeptically.

Hagrid shrugged. "Yeh get all kinds at the Hog's Head."

"You're going to have a dragon?" Meghan's face was aglow, and not just from the heat. "Can I see him when he hatches?"

"O' course yeh can. Yeh all can. I'll let yeh know when he starts hatchin' out. Yeh won' tell nobody, will yeh?" Hagrid's face was suddenly anxious. "Yeh wouldn' do that?"

Harry glanced at the Pride. Their eyes were all on him. He was clearly the one expected to answer. His mind tumbled through all that he knew about Hagrid, and all that he thought he knew, from his first visit to this house, before he'd been four, to the memories he'd seen in Tom Riddle's diary only a month or two ago.

His hand rose to press against his chest, and he felt the engravings on his pendants. Hagrid's symbol on the pendants was a dragon.

He looked up into Hagrid's face. "We won't tell anyone," he said, holding out his hand. "Pride honor."

“Now, that I trust.” Hagrid chuckled and shook Harry’s hand gently, for him, which meant Harry was only dizzy for a few seconds afterwards.

“Let’s see,” said Ron, ticking points off on his fingers. “We have homework and tests. We have Quidditch. We have people getting Petrified. And now we have Hagrid and his Norwegian Ridgeback. Can we get anything else to worry about, here?”

“Be careful what you wish for, Ron,” said Ginny, scratching her nose with her quill. “How do you spell antimony?”

Hermione spelled it out for her. The Pride had gathered around a table in the common room, most of them doing homework, Meghan reading a book called Household Healing Hints, which was almost half as big as she was.

“Anyway, I’m not worried about Quidditch,” said Harry, flipping through his Charms book to find the section he wanted. “We have a good strong team, we play well together, we should do just fine.”

“And no one’s been Petrified in months,” said Neville. “Maybe the Heir’s given up.”

Or maybe he just has a new pet to play with. No one wanted to say it. Saying it was too close to believing it, and somehow, the question of whether Hagrid was the Heir of Slytherin, and had opened the Chamber of Secrets, had been dropped in this more pressing, urgent need. The Pride had come together to help a friend. It was what they did.

“But we do need to do something about that dragon,” said Draco quietly, after checking to see that no one was eavesdropping on them. “I did a little reading. Norwegian Ridgebacks start breathing serious fire at the age of three weeks. The author of the book recommended keeping them in a paddock at least a hundred feet on a side, well away from anything flammable. There’s no way Hagrid’s going to be able to pull off anything like that.”

“He’ll be lucky if the thing fits in his house after a couple of weeks,” said Ron. “Charlie says baby dragons grow like anything.”

Harry felt as if he'd received a mild electrical shock. Ginny's head jerked up from her essay. Their eyes met for an instant before Ginny looked away. "Ron," she said, "you're brilliant."

"What?"

"We can send the dragon to Charlie," said Harry. "It's what he does, isn't it? Taking care of dragons?"

"Hagrid loved Charlie when he was here," said Ginny. "He'll know his baby's in good hands."

Hermione snorted, closing her book. "In the first place," she said, "you can't just dump the dragon on Charlie. You'd have to ask, and it takes time for an owl to get to Romania and back. In the second place, how would you get it there? You can't exactly send a dragon by owl post. And in the third place, why don't you just take this to Dumbledore, or to Padfoot and Letha? They could get it sorted out right away, and we wouldn't have to risk getting into all this trouble."

Everyone stared at her. Draco broke the silence first. "You're in a funny mood. Someone eat all your Ice Mice again?"

"This isn't funny. What if it turns out we're actually helping the Heir of Slytherin? We should take this to the teachers and get to what we ought to be doing. Like getting ready for exams."

"I don't notice anyone here slacking off work," said Harry, waving at the books and parchment all over the table. "No one's marks have dropped. And the reason we're not reporting this is because we said we wouldn't."

"No, you said we wouldn't."

"I pledged Pride honor, Hermione. Are you going to break that?"

A pause stretched, grew uncomfortable. "No," said Hermione just before it got unbearable. "But I think you should." She shut her book

emphatically. "Before this gets us all into serious trouble." She marched off towards the girls' dormitories.

"She's being even weirder than usual," said Ron, watching Hermione disappear up the stairs.

"She did have some good points, though," said Ginny. "We'll need to get in touch with Charlie about this. And give some thought to how to get the dragon there."

"It'll be small at first," said Draco. "If we can get this done quickly, it could go in a crate, like people hang under their broomsticks."

"So all we need is someone who's going to Romania," said Harry. "Someone who knows Charlie and can take the dragon to him, and someone who won't tell."

"That seems like quite a lot for one person," said Luna.

"I know who can do it," said Meghan, emerging from behind her book. "Cousin Tonks."

"Cousin... oh, of course!" Draco looked chagrined that he hadn't thought of this. "She's Charlie's girlfriend, she's of age, she goes to Romania sometimes on the weekends to visit him... of course, she's perfect!"

"If she'll do it," said Harry doubtfully. "She might not want to smuggle a dragon around, since she's a trainee Auror."

"So write to her," said Ginny. "And to Charlie. We should do that as soon as we can, tonight even."

"But the dragon's not even hatched yet," protested Ron.

"Every day we delay now is another day we have to worry about someone finding that thing in Hagrid's hut," said Harry. "Do you want to see him get sacked? Even Dumbledore won't be able to overlook this one..."

Dumbledore. Of course. His heart lifted suddenly. Dumbledore trusted Hagrid.

But Dumbledore trusted Quirrell and Lockhart, too...

Not like he trusts Hagrid. Not with his secrets. Not with his life.

Dumbledore wouldn't let Hagrid stay here if there was even a chance Hagrid might hurt someone. Hagrid can't be the one who opened the Chamber. He just can't be.

"Of course I don't want to see him get sacked," Ron was saying as Harry became aware of his surroundings again. "But I'd rather not get expelled, either." He sighed, pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment, and started scribbling on it. "Dear Charlie," he muttered. "How are you? I am fine, except that I have a problem. Someone I know has an illegal dragon..."

Dear Ron,

Thanks for the letter. Fallen into evil company, have you? Well done. Don't let Percy drag you down. I'd love to take the Ridgeback, and I think your idea for getting him here is fine. I hope you've checked with her, though, Tonks can have a temper if you promise her into things without letting her know. (Thanks also for getting her over here – I didn't see her at Easter, and I miss her.)

Hope to hear from you soon,

Charlie

Draco –

Sure, why not? I love being an accessory to crime, and we can't let Hagrid get sacked (I assume that's who it is, no one else at Hogwarts would be quite that stupid). Shall we say the night after the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match, midnight, top of the Astronomy Tower? Oh yes, and thank you for getting me an excuse to go see Charlie. It's awfully nice of you.

See you then,

Tonks

A week and a half before the match, Harry was shaken awake by Draco. His brother wordlessly handed him a strip of parchment with two words in Hagrid's handwriting.

It's hatching.

Harry catapulted out of bed and started throwing his clothes on. Draco woke Neville, and Harry went to work on Ron.

"How're we going to get the girls?" asked Ron quietly as they tiptoed down the stairs.

"Like this," said Harry, and held out his arm for Hedwig, who was waiting in the common room. He handed her the parchment. "Wake Meghan," he told her. "Once she's up, go to Hermione."

Hedwig hooted softly. Harry tossed her out the open window. "Now we just wait," he said.

It wasn't long before Meghan came scurrying down the stairs, followed by a yawning Ginny and an excited Luna. Harry was a little surprised – this was the most emotion he'd ever seen the blond girl exhibit.

Draco smiled at Luna. "You look happy."

"I've never seen a dragon hatch before. Daddy will love hearing about it."

The boys exchanged nervous looks. "Er, Luna, that might not be a good idea," said Harry. "Hagrid could get in trouble if anyone knew he had a dragon."

"Don't worry," said Luna serenely, fastening her outdoor cloak. "I won't tell him until after the dragon's gone."

Draco shrugged. "It's the best we're probably going to get," he muttered in Harry's ear.

Hermione came down the girls' stairs, disapproval in every line of her body. "You're really going to go and watch this, then?" she asked.

"No, we just thought we'd all get up early and go for a run," retorted Ron. "What do you think?"

"I think you're all mad."

"Are you coming or not?" interrupted Harry. He was getting very tired of Hermione's new holier-than-thou attitude.

"Yes. If only to make sure you don't do anything stupid – anything else stupid," she corrected herself pointedly.

Harry turned away from her, rolled his eyes pointedly at the rest of the Pride, and led the way out the portrait hole.

Hagrid answered his door at once, looking disheveled but very excited. "He's nearly out," he said. "Started hatchin' late last night, but I didn' want yeh all sneakin' out after dark, an' I was pretty sure he wouldn' get around ter actually breakin' through till this mornin'..."

The girls drew up chairs, the boys stood around the table. Hermione had lost her veneer of disinterest and was staring at the wildly rocking egg as avidly as anyone. The cracks in the shell widened even as they watched.

Neville jumped back as something punched through the shell, straight towards him. A back leg, maybe, Harry thought. Something else popped out of the opposite end, sending chips of shell flying towards Ginny, who caught one and yelped a little. "Hot," she said, tossing it quickly onto the table and brushing off her hands.

"There's his little nose!" Hagrid sounded awestruck in a way Harry had never heard before, though he suspected if he asked his Pack-parents could provide examples. He wasn't about to ask, though, because he was sure at least one of the examples would involve him.

He knew perfectly well under what conditions he had made his first visit to Hogwarts.

The entire shell exploded. The Pride ducked, covering their heads with their cloaks. When they came back up, the baby dragon was lying flat on the table, looking around. It was black and gangling, with huge spiny wings and a long, thin body. Its eyes were orange and looking at the group hungrily. On its brow Harry could see a pair of stubby horns.

"It's a boy," said Hagrid mistily. "Isn't he beau'iful?" He hauled a large bucket up to the table. Harry caught the mixed smells of strong alcohol and blood. He recoiled a little, and he wasn't the only one. Draco was turning faintly green, and Meghan was edging away, looking as if she might be sick.

"Ron, get me a saucer?" Hagrid requested. Ron hurried to the cupboard and found what Hagrid wanted, handing it to him from as far away as possible. Hagrid filled the saucer with the mixture in the bucket, then set it in front of the dragon. It sniffed at it and sneezed, sending sparks flying and igniting the liquid for a brief moment, until Hagrid hastily blew it out.

"It's nearly eight-thirty," said Hermione. "We'll be missed."

Harry checked his watch and almost swore. She was right. "Hagrid, we've really got to go. We'll be back later to see how you're doing..." He trailed off. Hagrid wasn't listening. He looked as if nothing short of demolishing the house around his ears would get his attention, and maybe not even that. He was totally fixated on the dragon, now eagerly lapping up the horrid stuff in the saucer.

"We'll tell him about Charlie later," said Draco quietly, steering Meghan and Luna toward the door. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"You really want it?" asked Ron, gulping as the door swung shut behind him. "After smelling that?"

"No, but I have to eat."

“Why?”

“Because two of our teachers will notice if I don’t.”

Hermione, behind them, gave a loud sniff. Clearly, she was still of the mind to let the Pack-parents deal with Hagrid’s dragon.

Harry turned to face her, letting the rest of the Pride pass him by. “What you think of this is your own problem,” he said quietly. “But if you tell, you’re breaking Pride honor.”

“You had no right to pledge it,” retorted Hermione. “Not without checking with all of us.”

“What was I supposed to do, call a vote?” Despite good intentions, Harry was starting to get angry. “If you had something to say, why didn’t you just say it?”

“When you’d already said we wouldn’t tell? Do I look like a tattletale?”

“Yes.” Harry heard the word coming out of his mouth and cursed inwardly. He would have given anything to take it back, but it was too late.

Hermione was pale with fury. Without saying a word, she shoved him hard, then ran towards the castle.

“All right, today we’re going to finish our talismans,” announced Aletha in Defense Against the Dark Arts on Friday. “Does everyone have their potion?”

Flasks were produced from within schoolbags. Snape had grudgingly agreed to make room on his curriculum for a simple Protection Potion, which would glow if something with evil intent towards its maker came within a few yards. Sirius had asked, but the students’ potions hadn’t glowed when Snape came near. He supposed petty nastiness didn’t really count as evil.

“I’ll pass back your frames,” said Sirius, walking through the room and placing the small wooden disks in front of each student. Aletha had

found several runes for protection and given the students their choice of which one to etch into the disk with their wands. They'd had a good long discussion on the values of cutting out the actual lines of the rune, or cutting away the extra wood, so that the rune was all that was left. Most of the class had ended up cutting out the lines of their rune, since it was less work, but a few of them had chosen to cut away the excess wood instead.

The students had also been allowed to choose the color of the ink with which they inscribed smaller runes around the outside of their disk. These runes would tell them if they were being menaced by a human being, a Dark magical creature which could think, or just an animal which thought they would make a good snack. The choices were as varied as the students themselves, and some of them made Sirius laugh. He would never have guessed, for instance, that Seamus Finnegan liked aquamarine.

"Sir, what are the cords for?" asked Dean Thomas, picking up the length of string Sirius had left at his place, along with the disk.

"You need some way to keep the thing on you, don't you?" Sirius sat down on the desk, off to one side so that Aletha, sitting behind it, could still see the class.

"What do we do with the potion?" asked Lavender Brown. The students had learned quickly that as long as they didn't all shout at once, the Blacks didn't care much about hand-raising.

Sirius winced. "Oops. I am an idiot."

"Obviously, since you're only figuring that out now," said Aletha, making the class laugh. She waved her wand, creating ceramic dishes in front of each student. "Put your frame and your string into the dish and pour enough potion over them to cover. You should use about half of it. I'll set a timer for ten minutes. When it's up, bring your frame up here and pour the potion off into the waste bucket." She conjured that as well. "While you're waiting, we'll practice the spell you'll use at that point."

“After that spell goes on, you give them a second soaking in the potion,” said Sirius. “Then you put the string on, one final spell, and they’re done. So, get them soaking, so we can start working on the spells.”

The students went to work. Sirius frowned, watching them. Something didn’t feel quite right. Something about the way they were sitting...

It was strictly boy-girl, he realized. Hermione, instead of partnering with Harry or Draco as usual, was sitting on the opposite side of the room from them, next to Colleen Lamb. That in itself was fine – the girl could use a bit of help, she was so timid she almost never did anything right, for simple lack of trying – but it indicated a serious argument among the cubs.

“Yes, I’d noticed,” said Aletha quietly when he pointed this out. “She hasn’t been sitting with them at meals, either. I don’t think it’s still just their quarrel from Easter. Something’s up.”

“Should we get involved, or no?”

Aletha frowned. “I’m not sure, really. They’ve always worked these things out themselves with no trouble. I think we should give it some time. Say, another week. If they haven’t made up by then, we’ll give them a hand.”

“All right.” Sirius turned back to the classroom. “Everyone ready?”

Everyone was.

“All right, wands out. The incantation for the first spell is *Insignis Malduco...*”

Hagrid was a bit sad to think about giving up his little Norbert so soon after getting him, but he agreed that sending the dragon to Charlie was the smartest thing to do. “An’ I’ll’ve had this week’r so,” he said, sniffing happily as Norbert batted an empty brandy bottle around the floor of his hut. “He’s so sweet.”

Ron dodged a sweep of Norbert's spiky tail. "About as sweet as a Cockroach Cluster," he muttered to Harry. "At least no one will spot him by accident."

Neville had told Hagrid about the trick he'd learned, to make things less visible to people who shouldn't see them, and Hagrid had agreed to have Norbert hidden. Experimentation had proved that the magic wore off within twenty-four hours, so Neville renewed it before he went to bed at night and when he got up in the morning, making Norbert invisible to everyone but the Pride, Hagrid, and Fang.

Hermione was still avoiding everyone. Harry hadn't even been able to corner her long enough to apologize. The one time he'd tried, she'd stuck her fingers in her ears and hummed loudly so that she couldn't hear him. He'd had to give it up.

I'll try again on Sunday, he thought. After we're well rid of Norbert.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts, he didn't notice the skinny face at the window.

Dear sir,

I've looked, but I didn't see anything like what you said should be there. Do you want me to say that I did?

Heavens, yes, boy. I didn't think I raised such a fool. It must be there, somewhere, but they've no grounds to search unless there's a complaint. Send it immediately.

Have you anything to report on the matter I asked you about?

Sir,

No, there's been nothing. No communication, no word. The letter you wanted is enclosed.

The morning of the Quidditch match was fair and mild, and everyone was excited. Wood kept urging the team to eat, but Harry was having trouble swallowing. He kept looking down the table at Hermione, who seemed engrossed in her book. Not even seeing Padfoot and Letha decked out in Gryffindor colors could lift his spirits.

I have to try to talk to her. He set aside his half-eaten bacon and got up.

“That’s the spirit, Harry, early to the field!” declared Wood. “Come on, everyone, let’s all go!”

Fred and George grumbled a little, having not yet finished their eggs, but Wood swept them along in his wake, ignoring Harry’s half-formed protests that he had something else to do. Ron and Draco, bringing up the rear, appropriated a stack of toast and a dish of marmalade on the way out, earning everyone’s thanks as they passed it out in the locker room.

“I wanted to try to apologize to Hermione,” muttered Harry to Draco as he pulled on his red Quidditch robes. “But Wood thought I was headed for the field, so I never got a chance.”

“Don’t worry, Harry, she’ll still be there after the match. Maybe seeing Gryffindor win will sweeten her disposition a little.”

“She won’t see it,” said Ron, shaking his head – he couldn’t understand why anyone would voluntarily miss a Quidditch match. “She was headed upstairs, last I saw. Professor Black went after her.”

“There, see?” Draco straightened Harry’s collar. “Padfoot’ll talk her around. He’s good at it.”

“And if he can’t, Moony and Danger will.” Harry smiled. His Pack-parents would be in the stands, he knew, cheering him on. He picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand and sat down on a bench to wait for the rest of the team. Idly he checked his watch – it was 10:57. Hermione sat alone in the library.

I don’t care about them, or their stupid game. They can all go fly into a tornado for all I care.

She sniffled.

They think I'm a tattletale. They think I'd give them away. I never would. I just said it might be a good idea to get some help. The Pack-parents wouldn't get us in trouble – they understand about keeping things secret for your friends. They'd help us.

Another snuffle.

Harry shouldn't have pledged Pride-honor without asking me. I'm the alpha female. He doesn't care about me anymore. None of them care about me. And I don't care about them, so that works out fine.

A third snuffle, bigger than the first two.

"Neenie," said a man's voice from behind her.

Hermione's anger exploded. "Don't call me that!" She spun and hurled a book at the offender.

Padfoot caught it easily in one hand and set it aside. "That's enough," he said. "Why don't you tell me what's going on."

"I can't!" Madam Pince was down at the Quidditch pitch, so were all the other students, no one was around to hear her shout. Which also meant no one had heard her detested nickname, but that wasn't the point. "I can't tell anyone! Harry was stupid and swore Pride-honor we wouldn't tell!"

"Hmm." Padfoot sat down opposite her at the table. "Pride-honor, eh? Do you want to tell whatever this is?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"If I swear not to tell anyone, do you think you can tell me then? Pack-honor?"

Hermione rubbed her eyes. She hated situations like this.

"I hate seeing you sad this way," said Padfoot quietly. "And I think it would make you feel better to tell it. I might even be able to help. It's what I'm here for."

Hermione finally looked up. "Do you promise not to get anyone in trouble?" she asked.

"I'll do my best," said Padfoot. "Shall we say, I won't punish anyone unless they really, truly, deserve it."

Hermione nodded. "All right." She sat up and took a deep breath. "It might surprise you," she warned.

"Very little surprises me any more," said Padfoot dryly.

"Hagrid has a dragon."

Padfoot froze. "That's going to do it."

Harry shivered a little, and wondered why. He wasn't cold, or at least he hadn't been a moment before...

Draco turned around. Through the fabric of his robes, Harry saw a dim light glowing.

The pendants!

He plunged a hand inside his robes and pulled the chain out. It was cooler than it should have been – he always wore it next to his skin – and one of the carvings was glowing. Draco saw what he was doing and blanched, pulling out his own hastily. "Who is it?" he asked, fumbling through his own.

"I'm not sure." The tiny carving was feline, with large paws, a short tail, and tufts of fur atop each ear. Harry couldn't recall the name of the thing, nor who it meant. Hastily he ran through the Pride in his mind.

Cat is Hermione, fox is Draco, doe for Meghan, hawk for Ron, owl for Luna, Neville's the demiguise...

A crash drew his attention. Ron was sitting on the floor, chalk-white. "Ginny," he whispered.

“What?” Fred turned his head.

“Ginny’s in trouble!” Ron was pulling himself up. “Something’s happened to her – she’s in some kind of danger–”

The locker room door burst open. Luna, Meghan, and Neville crashed in. Ron wheeled to face them. “Where’s Ginny?” he demanded.

“She didn’t come with us,” said Luna. “She said she was going to use the bathroom.”

Ron cursed, staring down at his pendants. “There’s a million bathrooms in that castle – I wish we had some way of knowing where she is!”

A flare of red light made everyone exclaim. One of the jewels in Ron’s pendants had flashed, and was now glowing steadily. The Quidditch team was staring wide-eyed, the Pride looked frightened and shaken. Harry felt fear creeping up his spine like a snake. Ginny was part of his Pride, if anything happened to her it was his fault...

“Don’t panic,” he ordered, as much to himself as to the others. “Let’s get up to the castle and start looking for her.”

“You can’t leave now!” protested Wood. “We’ve got the game!”

“To hell with the game,” said George, dropping his broomstick. “My sister’s in trouble.”

“I’ll get Percy,” said Fred. “Meet you at the castle.”

“Why did it do that?” asked Ron as the Pride dashed out of the locker room, a step or so behind George. “Flash red that way?”

“Hold on,” said Draco, skidding to a halt. “I think I may know. Turn around, Ron.”

“Turn around? My sister’s going to die!”

“It’ll just take a second. Turn around and face the other way.”

Grumbling, Ron turned. The light from the jewel dimmed to almost nothing.

“Now face the castle.”

The light brightened again.

“It’s leading us to Ginny,” said Harry, suddenly understanding. “Like playing Hot and Cold. The brighter the light, the closer to her we are.”

“Come on!” Ron led the way at a run, the gold medallions bouncing against his chest at every stride. Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw two people with red hair – Fred and Percy, he was sure – running flat out across the grass.

The Pride had just gotten inside the castle when the pendants went icy all at once. Draco was the first to get a good look, and swore when he did. “It’s Hermione.”

“No, it’s Dadfoot!” Meghan was trembling.

“It’s both,” said Harry grimly, spreading his pendants so that everyone could see the three glowing figures. “They’re probably together. Come on, Ron, which way?”

“Er, I don’t know.” Ron spun in a circle. The jewel’s light barely flickered.

“What about up?” demanded Draco.

Ron lifted the pendants from his chest and held them above his head. The glow brightened considerably.

Percy crashed through the door and dashed past them without acknowledging that they existed, taking the marble stairs two at a time. Fred followed him more slowly, rubbing at his side. “Never seen him like this,” he panted. “You lot go on. I’ll catch up.”

The Pride started up the stairs. “She’s not down here!” called George’s voice from down one of the ground floor corridors.

“I’ll check the dungeons!” Fred called back.

“Think we should tell them what we know?” panted Draco to Harry.

“No. We might be wrong.”

On the second floor, Ron’s jewel indicated a corridor rather than the stairs. He charged around the corner and stopped dead. Harry crashed into him from behind, Neville slammed into him, and they all fell over. Draco just managed to avoid falling over them himself, and caught Meghan as she skidded to a halt.

Percy was just straightening up, holding a limp Ginny in his arms.

“No,” moaned Ron. “No... Ginny...”

“She’s alive,” said Percy in a very flat voice. “Just unconscious. Move, please, she needs the hospital wing.”

Filled with relief, Harry scooted aside.

“Everything is normal again,” said Luna. It took Harry a moment to realize she meant the pendants. Sure enough, the metal was a normal temperature again, and the carvings had stopped glowing.

“Then Dadfoot’s OK!” said Meghan brightly. “And Hermione too!”

“And I have to get back to the pitch,” said Harry. “Wood’s going to be furious, you saw him...”

Chattering in relief, the Pride started down the stairs. Draco was the first to the bottom. “Moony!” Harry heard him say happily. “We had a scare – do you know what happened?”

“Yes, actually, I do,” said Moony, coming into Harry’s field of view. “Meghan, come here.”

Meghan ran down the last few stairs, looking curiously at Moony. He embraced her gently, then took her hand and led her down the hall. "Come on, all of you," he said over his shoulder.

"Something's wrong," muttered Draco.

Harry nodded. They'd learned when they were still very young how to see what people were saying with their posture and tones of voice, as well as their words. Moony was as good as shouting that he had bad news to tell.

"I wish I could find the right words to tell you this," said Moony, stopping outside the hospital wing door. "There's been another attack. Two people were Petrified."

"But..." Ron protested. "Ginny was all limp. Petrified people go stiff. And there wasn't anyone else there."

Moony shook his head. "I'm not talking about Ginny, Ron. We're not sure yet what happened to her. Two other people. They were found together near the library."

Harry's hand went to his chest as a conversation played back in his head. "Padfoot and Hermione," he said with a horrible certainty, wishing with all his might that he was wrong.

Moony nodded slowly.

Meghan shrieked, a terrible, high-pitched wail that seemed to go on forever. Neville seized her shoulders, turned her to face him, and shook her once, hard. "Stop it!" he shouted. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" cried Meghan. "Why not?"

"Because he wouldn't want you to." Neville was very close to Meghan now, looking straight down into her face. "Because it won't help anything. You have to be strong. Your mum needs you to be strong. She can't take care of you and herself too."

Meghan hiccupped. "Who will take care of me, then?" she asked in a very small voice.

Neville glanced over Meghan's shoulder at Moony, who gave him a tiny nod. "I will," he said. "If you'll let me."

Meghan gulped and nodded, then hid her face in Neville's robes. Draco was standing very still, one arm around Luna, and for the life of him Harry couldn't decide if she was comforting him, or he her, or both. Ron's freckles were standing out as if they glowed. "Can we see them?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes." Moony turned and opened the doors of the hospital wing. Harry walked in, feeling as though he walked into a nightmare.

Danger and Letha sat together on a bed, Letha sobbing into Danger's shoulder. Meghan detached herself from Neville and ran to the women, who made room for her. Neville sat down in a chair next to the bed.

On the bed opposite them lay Padfoot, his left arm outstretched and his hand curled around his wand, his right curved across his chest, cradling Hermione to him. Her arms were around him, her head turned so that she was looking the same way he was. Both of them had expressions of shock frozen on their faces. Both looked as if they'd been carved from stone.

There was no question now that it was Luna who was comforting Draco. He was paler than usual and shaking. She guided him carefully to a bed and helped him sit down, and began to stroke his hair. Harry turned away. It wasn't his place to tell them what to do.

Percy stepped out from behind a screen farther down the room. Harry suspected Ginny was lying back there. He caught Ron's eye and beckoned to him peremptorily. Ron took one last look at Hermione, then walked quickly past Harry and Moony to where Percy was, and they disappeared behind the screens together.

Moony turned to look at Harry. One hand rose and made a small beckoning motion.

Harry was sure he broke a speed record getting to Moony's side. Just at the moment, he didn't care who might see him or what they would say. He wanted to be held. He wanted to shut out the vision of his godfather and his sister lying completely still with their eyes glassy and staring.

And we never made up. She was still mad at me. I let her get Petrified being mad at me.

It was his turn to hide his face in someone's robes. He wasn't crying, quite, but he was sure that anything else going wrong, anything, would turn him into a wreck.

"I have to get back down to the pitch," he muttered, pulling away. "The game..."

Moony shook his head. "It's been cancelled," he said. "All after-school activities have been cancelled. You're to be escorted everywhere by teachers, and to stay in your dormitories unless you're in class or at meals."

Harry nodded in understanding. Something odd was happening. Instead of this news making him feel worse, making him cry and scream as he had been so sure would happen, it seemed to light a fire within him, clearing away his emotions. His mind was working at top speed, unhampered by fear or sorrow.

"It won't help," he said, seeing this very clearly. "Having teachers along won't help, will it?"

Moony did not reply, looking instead at Padfoot's unmoving form. Harry knew his godfather's skills with a wand. He was fast, accurate, and powerful. The dueling club had continued to meet on Wednesday evenings, and other teachers had attended from time to time. They always showed off their own dueling skills, facing off with Padfoot, and he had never lost a match. He had tied several, but never out-and-out lost.

Yet he had not been able to prevent himself and Hermione from being Petrified.

“No,” said Moony finally, answering Harry’s question. “It won’t. I don’t know if anything will help. Not until, or unless, we find out what’s doing this.”

Harry’s eyes landed on Padfoot’s wand. “What spells did he use?” he asked. “Maybe that would tell you what he was fighting.”

Moony made a sound of frustration. “I should have thought of that.”

Harry let his Pack-father go as Moony pulled out his own wand, walked over to Padfoot’s side, and touched his wand’s tip to Padfoot’s. “Prior Incantato,” he said.

Harry watched as a pair of smoky eyes appeared from the place where the two wands met. They looked bloodshot and painful, and were dripping tears. “What’s that?”

“A Conjunctivitus Curse,” said Moony, taking his wand away. “Most often used against dragons, but I’ve never heard of a dragon able to Petrify.”

A sudden realization made Harry’s stomach flip-flop. A dragon – Norbert – Tonks is coming tonight!

He looked at his watch. It was not quite five past eleven.

In just over twelve hours, we have to sneak out of here, get Norbert out of Hagrid’s hut, and get him up to the Astronomy Tower. All without being caught. And now we’re not allowed out unless we’re with a teacher.

He gave Moony a small nod, then went up the ward and behind the screen where Ginny lay. Percy and Ron were sitting next to her, and Madam Pomfrey was waving her wand over her. “Finally, a patient I can do something for,” Harry heard her say to herself. She turned to the boys. “She’s not injured, not ill, not harmed at all. I’d say she just

had some sort of shock that made her lose consciousness. Does she faint easily?"

Ron shook his head. "I've never known her to do it before," he said. "Maybe she saw the monster, or whatever it is, from behind."

"Maybe. Whatever the reason, she should be waking up soon..." Madam Pomfrey looked up at the crash of the double doors opening. "Oh, great Merlin. Mr. Weasley, would you please help me control your brothers."

"I can't control Fred and George," protested Ron. "Nobody can."

"I believe she was speaking to me," said Percy, still in the same flat voice he'd used in the hall. "Stay with her, Ron."

He got up and walked away, Madam Pomfrey beside him, her voice rising. "Keep it down! This is a hospital, not a Quidditch pitch!"

"She should take her own advice," said Harry, slipping behind Ron to take Percy's chair.

Ginny stirred. Ron leaned forward, hands made into fists on the arms of his chair. "Come on, Ginny," Harry heard him whisper. "Come on, wake up, be all right..."

Ginny's eyelids fluttered. "Tom?" she said querulously.

"Tom?" repeated Ron. "Ginny, there's nobody named Tom here."

Ginny's head turned. "Ron? Harry? Where am I?"

"Hospital wing," said Harry. "Percy found you in the hall. You'd collapsed."

"Collapsed?" Ginny frowned. "Why?"

"She doesn't know. She thinks you had a shock. What's the last thing you remember?"

“A shock? I didn’t have a shock. I was coming back from the bathroom, and then I was here.”

“What bathroom did you use?” asked Ron.

“Moaning Myrtle’s. The ground floor one was full, and the one on the first floor is miles away, so hers was closest.” Ginny closed her eyes, trying to remember. “I was in the bathroom, writing to Tom – I’ve been doing that quite a lot, he’s so friendly and helpful, and he knows so much about everything, and it’s not fair that he’s trapped in that old diary...”

Ron frowned. “How can you write without any quill or ink?”

“I had a quill,” said Ginny, making a face at him. “And Tom brings up some of the ink that’s already in the diary for me to use. He’s very considerate. I had just told him that I was on my way out for the Quidditch match, and I was going to try and get Hermione to come with me, and I’d tell him all about it afterwards, when I looked at my watch and saw it was three minutes to eleven so I had to hurry. I shut up the diary and opened the bathroom door...” She stopped.

“And?” prompted Ron.

“And that’s all I remember, until just now. Do you suppose someone attacked me?” Ginny stared at the two boys. “Hit me with a spell from behind, or something?”

“They might have,” said Harry. “But why aren’t you Petrified? That seems to be what happens to everyone else.”

“Maybe Tom would know. He knows a lot about magic.” Ginny rummaged in her pocket, then froze. “It’s not here. His diary’s gone.”

“Gone?” Harry and Ron said at the same time.

Ginny was patting herself all over, checking in each of her pockets. “It’s definitely gone,” she said worriedly. “Whoever attacked me took the diary.”

Harry scowled. This made what he had come to tell Ron even more important. "We have to den," he said. "Now."

(A/N: Ladies and gents, please... spend just one minute finding something special you liked about this chapter. A moment, a line, a joke, even the chapter title. I'm not asking for a super-long review, but it doesn't take more than a moment to attach one specific comment to a generic "gee it's great, update soon" – sometimes I'm not even sure you've really read the chapter! (A few people excluded, you know who you are, and thank you a million times for your long and insightful reviews.) Not that I'm going to stop writing or lower the quality or anything if you don't, but it would make me really happy. :puppy-dog eyes: Please?)

Chapter 33: Committee of Inquiry

I have to stop looking at them. Looking won't change anything.

Remus turned away from the still figures of Sirius and Hermione, lying together on the hospital bed. He knew he would pay later for being so controlled now; he'd have to ask Dumbledore if he could have permission for himself and Danger to go hunting in the Forest later tonight. Ripping something to shreds would suit him about now.

But my robes are not a good something to do that to. Deliberately, he opened his hands, releasing the cloth, and willed his shoulders and arms to relax, which they did grudgingly. They're not dead, they're in no pain, and this is reversible. I am overreacting, and I need to stop.

Madam Pomfrey and Percy Weasley had succeeded in quieting down Fred and George, and the nurse had allowed the boys to see their sister briefly, before she evicted all three of the older Weasleys. "I'm not even going to try with the others," she said to Remus on her way back up the ward. "From Meghan's stories and what I've seen myself, I wouldn't get far, and at least most of them understand the meaning of quiet."

Harry came out from behind the screen that covered Ginny's bed now, and walked quickly past Sirius and Hermione, not looking at them. He went straight to Draco and gripped his brother's hand for a moment. Remus watched as their grips shifted, one, two, three, almost faster than he could follow, and certainly no pattern he knew.

Came up with their own shake, then. Good for them.

Harry said something in a low voice to Draco and Luna, who both nodded, got up, and headed for Ginny's bed. He went to Neville next, and they had a low-voiced talk, both glancing at Meghan, curled between her Pack-mothers and crying softly. Finally Neville nodded, as if agreeing to something, and followed Harry back up the ward, both boys nodding respectfully to Remus as they passed him.

Pride business. I shouldn't interfere.

And I might appreciate a little interference over here.

Remus crossed to the chair Neville had vacated and sat in it himself. What do you need?

I'm not sure yet. I haven't seen Letha like this before. She's so shaken, so unsure.

Yes, we have. Twice that I can think of. Remus displayed the appropriate memories. The day Aletha and Danger had met again after their years of separation, the day he and Danger had told her the truth about Sirius, he had seen past Aletha's usual calm and witty façade to the deeply emotional woman beneath. Then, the night before Sirius' trial, when he had threatened Andromeda Tonks to bring Remus and Danger together in time for moonrise – Andromeda had agreed to play the victim, but Aletha hadn't known that, and the serenity she'd displayed through the rest of their ordeal had cracked.

Ah. You're quite right. And I see a pattern.

As do I. As long as Aletha has one person on whom she can rely completely, she can face anything. But if that person is harmed...

Not the safest way to be. But I doubt there's anything we can do about it.

And we shouldn't even if we could. It's her choice to make, not ours.

True. And she does still have us, and Meghan and the other cubs. And... Danger muttered a curse. I almost forgot. Her job. Is she going to be able to handle taking the classes, teaching alone where she and Sirius used to do it together?

I think she will. She might need a week or so off, Albus can get a substitute for that long, but I think she'll be able to finish out the year.

Aletha's crying was beginning to abate, her sobs no longer shook her all over, but she was still far from calm. She alternated between allowing Danger to hold her and hugging Meghan close. Remus kept his distance for the moment, though he stayed alert. People in shock

had been known to act very unlike themselves, and Aletha was a powerful woman.

Meghan rubbed her eyes and sniffled hard. "Danger?" she said, looking up at the woman. "Is it true nobody knows what the monster is that..." She didn't finish, allowing her eyes to speak for her, as they flicked towards her father and Hermione and hastily back to Danger's face.

"I'm afraid so." Danger's own voice was rough, she was holding in her tears in the face of Aletha's greater grief. "If we knew, we might be able to find where it hides, or protect people against it."

"But wouldn't the people who were attacked know? Wouldn't they have seen it? They all look surprised. They must have seen it."

Meghan had a good point, Remus realized. The people who were Petrified, without exception, looked shocked or frightened by something. If we could revive one of them, maybe we could find out what it is. But we can't revive them until the Mandrakes are ready...

Or can we?

"Yes, that's true," Danger was saying. "But they can't tell us what they saw."

"They could if they were well again," said Meghan. Her upturned face was hopeful. "I could make them well again. I could make one of them well again, so they could tell us."

"No," croaked another voice. Aletha lifted her head. Her eyes were bloodshot, but no less fierce for that as she fixed them on Meghan. "No. You will do nothing of the kind."

"But Mama..."

"I said no!" Aletha held her daughter hard and stared at her. "I have lost enough. I will not lose you as well. You are forbidden to heal any of those people. Do you understand me?"

Danger took a breath. Remus felt the words she was about to say in her mind. Letha, be reasonable. Meghan wouldn't harm herself, and we'd know so much more...

Don't, he warned swiftly. Don't even try.

But she's being unfair!

And in her place, would you be any different? Remus knocked aside the barrier Danger had put up and showed her the thought she'd tried to hide from them both – Meghan using her Ravenclaw power to heal Hermione. I want her back as much as you do, but not if it means hurting Letha again. She's right. She has lost enough. We all have.

And if this means more attacks? People dying, even?

Remus took a moment to think it through. We can't even be sure they saw the monster, he said. Or that they'd be able to tell us what it was if they did. And if the Heir thinks we have a way to revive Petrified people who might tell us who he is, he will start killing them. There's no way to bring them back from the dead.

Have I ever told you I hate it when you make sense?

At some point, I'm sure.

The doors of the hospital wing opened. Albus Dumbledore strode in. He looked slightly distressed, but that could have been caused by anything from a lack of hot chocolate to an earthquake, thought Remus critically. The man's facial control was almost perfect, as close as any human could probably get.

In this case, he would have been willing to wager on what was causing the look. Dumbledore stopped a few feet from the bed holding Sirius and Hermione, regarded them for a long moment, then turned to Remus. "I must speak with you. Immediately, if you can."

Remus stood up. "Of course. Will you be all right, love?" he asked Danger.

"We'll come too," said Aletha in something resembling her normal tones, looking up. "If we may."

"Certainly. I did not like to ask it of you, but offered, I gladly accept."

Aletha stood up, looked once more at Sirius' motionless face, then bent and kissed Meghan. "Behave," she told the girl. "And tell the others where we're going. Where are we going?" she asked Dumbledore.

"Your office, if you would be so kind?"

"We're in the office," Aletha said to Meghan, who nodded, then raced up the ward and vanished behind the screen where the rest of the Pride was holding conclave.

Dumbledore embraced Aletha. "You have my sympathies," he said, keeping the phrase from sounding trite. "Will you need time away from work? It can be arranged."

"No, thank you, Albus." A trace of a smile flitted across Aletha's face. "At least he had the good sense to get himself Petrified on a weekend. I should be fit for work by Monday."

Remus turned around so that no one would see the expression on his face.

"And will you need any assistance?"

"At the moment, I don't think so. But if I do, I'll let you know."

"And I will surely do everything in my power to provide it." Dumbledore led the way out of the hospital wing, Aletha on his arm, for which Remus was grateful, since it meant her back was to him.

Don't laugh at Letha. It's not nice.

She's asking for it!

Even if she is... Danger's tone was playfully reproachful. Then it turned pleading again. Oh, Remus, you're sure she'll be all right?

Positive. Remus put his arm around Danger's shoulders, hoping she wouldn't penetrate his barriers and see that he was working on the "make believe you're brave" principle. She won't even know any time passed. It'll be as if she fell asleep in that corridor by the library and woke up when the potion's administered to her.

It just looks so horrible... what if something went wrong? What if she's not asleep, she's awake, and trapped in her body, and she can't move or do anything?

If that were true, she'd be upset by it, and we'd know. Remus reached into Danger's robes and tugged at her pendant chain. She's not dead, neither is she hurt, and she'll be waking up as soon as the Mandrakes come to full growth. If we let ourselves wallow in fear and what if's, we're letting the Heir of Slytherin win.

Well, we can't have that.

They had reached the office. Aletha opened the door and ushered them inside. "I'm all right now," she said in answer to Danger's questioning look. "Really."

"If you're not, tell us," said Remus. "It's why we're here."

"I will." Aletha took her seat. "Albus? What's so important?"

"I am afraid I must ask something of you," said Dumbledore gravely. "Something which may be outside the law, but is inside the bounds of common decency. But to explain why, I must tell you a story."

"We're listening," said Danger.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened before, within living memory," Dumbledore began. "Within my living memory. Fifty years ago. I was the Transfiguration teacher then. A girl was killed. There was talk of closing the school. But then a young wizard from Slytherin, a fifth year and a prefect, claimed to have discovered the Heir of

Slytherin in the person of a third-year Gryffindor, and to have failed to kill the famed monster as it escaped. The Gryffindor was expelled and his wand snapped. The Slytherin received a Special Award for Services to the School.”

“The Heir of Slytherin was a Gryffindor?” said Danger in confusion.

“The person believed to be the Heir of Slytherin was a Gryffindor,” corrected Dumbledore blandly. “And he was distraught. He had nowhere to go after being expelled from Hogwarts. His father had died, and he had never known his mother. He had few useful skills, fewer now that he could not legally use magic. But he was kind and gentle, and good with animals. I convinced Headmaster Dippet to allow him to assist Ogg, the gamekeeper.”

Aletha was nodding slowly, carefully folding a piece of parchment into smaller and smaller halves.

Dumbledore reached into his robes and pulled out a letter. “This morning, I received this from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I do not believe it to be a coincidence.” He handed the letter to Remus. Aletha came around the desk to read over his shoulder. Danger simply closed her eyes.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

We have received information that one Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of the Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, may be raising an illegal dragon in or around his home. The penalties for this action are strict, up to fifteen years in Azkaban, twenty-five if the animal in question appears maltreated.

A committee of inquiry will be arriving at Mr. Hagrid’s home this evening to investigate this matter. Your presence would be appreciated. Kindly await the committee between eleven and eleven-thirty tonight.

Remus folded the letter back up, frowning. “Hagrid’s never made it a secret that he’d like to have a dragon, but he wouldn’t actually be crazy enough to raise one on Hogwarts grounds, would he?”

"I am not certain. However, I do suspect that this accusation, true or not, is merely a cover, and that once Hagrid is in custody, someone will rediscover his connection to the other current happenings at the school, and use that as an excuse to jail him without trial."

"And now that there've been more attacks," said Danger, and Remus felt her sudden understanding and accompanying fear, "they could do it easily, couldn't they? Claim they're taking steps to keep the students safe?"

"Indeed. And in my own person, I can do nothing, nor can I ask any witch or wizard to intervene in this case. However..."

I do love Albus' howevers.

Oh, me too. Danger smiled politely, with just a hint of the predator behind her eyes. Wonder what it is this time?

"All right," said Harry. "We have a plan, then."

"No," said Neville.

Everyone turned to look at him. "No?" repeated Ron. "Why not?"

Neville turned pink under so much scrutiny, but he had a look on his face Harry remembered. It was the same one he'd worn when he had challenged them the year before, as they had prepared to go down the trapdoor and try to stop Voldemort from getting the Sorcerer's Stone. "I'm not going with you. I'm not going anywhere tonight. Pearl needs me, and I'm not leaving her."

"You can go," said Meghan quietly. "I'll be all right."

Neville shook his head. "I'm staying with you," he said. He looked challengingly at Harry. "We have to find some other way. I don't have to be with you to work the magic. I've been keeping Norbert hidden from up in our dorm, and it still works."

"But you won't know when we need it changed," objected Draco. "When we need you to hide Norbert and whatever Hagrid's got him in,

and when we need you to take it off so Tonks can see us. And we can't time it because we might get held up. You have to come along."

"I'm not coming," said Neville stubbornly.

Well, I wanted him to grow a backbone, thought Harry, feeling a sudden urge to laugh. I can't very well be mad that he's done what I hoped he would.

"Ron," said Ginny suddenly. "How did you find me again?"

Ron frowned. "I'm not sure what happened," he said. "It was my pendants. One of the jewels lit up, and the light got brighter as we got closer to you. But I didn't figure that out. Draco did." He looked over at the blond boy. "How'd you know that?"

"It was a guess," said Draco. "I thought about what Alex told me about the jewels."

"What Alex told you about the jewels?" repeated Harry. "When was this?"

"When I turned the daggers intangible."

Harry nodded; he knew about that. Draco had demonstrated it for them, and now the cubs wore their belts everywhere, under their robes. "What did he tell you?"

"He said the jewels could be used either to make other things like our pendants, or to give our pendants something extra. I think you did the second one, Ron, when you said you wished you had some way to find Ginny. You have Gryffindor gems, and the Gryffindor gift on the pendants is getting hot and cold and glowing. So the gem glowed brighter the closer you got to Ginny." Draco looked at Ginny. "Why'd you want to know?"

"I think I have an idea. But it doesn't want to come where I can see it."

"Don't think about it," advised Harry. "Think about other things."

“Luna,” said Ginny promptly. “What’s your father putting in the next issue of The Quibbler?”

“Oh, he’s got lots of fine articles,” said Luna, obviously pleased to be asked. “His best piece is by an American Healer, it’s all about lucimpeds.”

“Lucimpeds?” asked Ron, with a look on his face that suggested he knew what he was letting himself in for.

“Yes, they’re fascinating,” said Luna. “They’re long and thin and green, they masquerade as cucumbers in people’s back gardens, and they eat gnomes. They slide down the gnome tunnels, and their feet light up, so they can see where they’re going, and to blind the gnomes. A pair of lucimpeds can get rid of a gnome problem in three weeks. They work together very well, even when they can’t see each other. Some people think they’re telepathic.”

“Got it!” said Ginny suddenly.

“What?” asked three people together.

Ginny pulled out her pendant chain and lengthened it, holding it out. The rest of the Pride took it and put it on.

This is the Ravenclaw gift, isn’t it? Ginny asked. Silent speech, or sharing thoughts, or whatever you want to call it?

Meghan and Harry nodded together.

Meghan, you and Luna have Ravenclaw jewels, right?

I have a Gryffindor one now, said Luna, displaying it. It changed the night I was Sorted. But I still have three Ravenclaw. And Meghan’s are all Ravenclaw.

So one of you could use one of those jewels to make us all able to do this without wearing the same chain. Just for tonight. Right?

And then you can tell me when to change the magic, said Neville. So I can stay in and still keep you hidden.

Ginny, you're a genius, said Harry warmly.

Ginny blushed and reclaimed her chain quickly. "Thank Luna," she said. "I would never have remembered what I was thinking of if it hadn't been for her and the lucimpeds."

"There's one thing, though," said Draco. "Alex said these things are one use only. So we can't go doing this every day. Just in emergencies."

"Offhand, fox," said Harry, "I think this qualifies."

Draco bared his teeth and caught his thumb between them once.

"Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?" demanded Harry.

Draco leaned over to Luna. "Is the law of our side if I say ay?" he asked casually.

"No."

"No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir," said Draco to Harry.

"I don't understand this," said Ron.

"Don't worry, you're not alone," said Neville.

"They're just being rude to each other," said Meghan. "They do it all the time at home."

"I did have one other thing I wanted to ask," said Ginny. "What do you think we should do about Tom's diary?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't see that there's anything we can do," he said. "If we told a teacher, we'd have to tell them how you got it, and they wouldn't likely think someone's old blank diary you picked up off a

bathroom floor was worth much, unless we told them about the magic..."

"And that would be bad too." Ginny sighed. "All right. We'd better let it go, then."

"And besides, there's no way to find out who took it," added Draco. "Whether it was the person who attacked you, or someone else who just saw you lying there."

"But who would leave her there like that?" objected Ron. "It has to be the person who attacked her."

"And that person is probably the Heir of Slytherin." Harry's head was starting to hurt. "I declare this discussion over," he said wearily, standing up. "We're not getting anywhere. Let's go get some lunch. See you later, Ginny."

"Just a moment," said Madam Pomfrey, coming out of her office as they made for the door. "You're not to leave until someone arrives to escort you. They should be here any moment."

"They" turned out to be Danger. "Hello, everyone," she said with a small smile. "Apparently I'm qualified as a student-escorter. Next stop, Gryffindor Tower."

"But we wanted lunch," said Ron.

"They're serving it in the Tower," said Danger, leading the way. "After Professor McGonagall addresses you. I hope you like it in there, because you'll be spending a lot of time there for the next few months."

"Until this all stops," said Draco quietly. "Or until they close the school."

"Stop that," said Danger, making a flicking motion near Draco's nose. "They're not going to close the school. Everything will be all right. As long as you lot behave. No sneaking out, understand?"

“Understand,” said Harry, crossing his fingers behind his back. Of course we understand. We’re just not going to obey this one time. After that, we will. But we have to do this.

He wondered if he was trying to convince himself.

Harry liked Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, but there were times when they were a nuisance. Tonight, for instance, they wanted to talk about the Chamber of Secrets, and the Heir of Slytherin, and who it could be. It was nearly eleven o’clock by the time they finally fell asleep.

The Pride-boys dressed silently and slipped down the stairs to the common room. Luna and Meghan were already there, waiting (Madam Pomfrey had kept Ginny in the hospital wing overnight). Luna held her pendants in her hand. “I wish,” she said clearly, “that all of the Pride who are awake be able to talk inside their heads, like we can when we share a chain, for two hours.”

One of the gems flared up, bathing them all in blue light, then subsided.

“Did it work?” asked Ron.

I don’t know, what do you think? Draco quipped.

Very funny, said Harry. Neville? Ready when you are.

Neville nodded, taking his place on a couch. Meghan sat next to him, and their hands met. No one but the Pride can see them, he said silently, his eyes shut. No one but the Pride will notice them. They’re not important to anyone else. No one but the Pride will see them. He opened his eyes. I think that should do it. Good luck.

Good luck, echoed three female voices. Luna, Meghan, and...

Ginny? asked Ron in surprise.

Luna said all the Pride who are awake, Ginny reminded her brother. You didn’t honestly think I was going to sleep on a night like this?

Never mind, said Harry. Come on, we're wasting time.

Ron tripped halfway down the first flight of stairs and rolled into a suit of armor, causing a resounding crash.

"What's that?" called a voice from down the hall. "Show yourself!"

Harry swore. Damn it, we forgot about sound! Neville!

Hold on, I'm on it.

Harry tuned out Neville's muttering in favor of pulling Ron to his feet and getting them out of the way of the two teachers and three ghosts who were coming to investigate the noise. Draco followed, skirting around the group. No one wanted to find out the hard way that Neville's magic wouldn't hold up against physical contact.

There, no one should hear you now, either, said Neville.

Thanks, said Harry, and then concentrated on getting downstairs and out of the castle without actually running into any of the teachers, prefects, and ghosts who were patrolling the corridors.

Sorry, muttered Ron on the third floor.

It was an accident, said Draco. Could have happened to anyone. And there was no harm done.

Just be more careful, all right? Harry gave his friend what he hoped was a carefree grin, but he could tell it had failed. He was too tense.

Once they were across the grounds, Neville adjusted the magic so that Hagrid and Fang would be able to see them.

They need to hear us too, said Ron, after knocking on the door with no answer.

Right. Another adjustment. Try it now.

Ron knocked again, and Hagrid flung the door open.

“What did we do?” asked Draco in bewilderment. Hagrid was pointing a loaded crossbow at them.

“Oh, it’s you,” muttered Hagrid, putting the crossbow aside. “Nothin’, nothin’. I’ve just bin expectin’... comp’ny.”

“Looks like you don’t want them,” said Harry, coming in. “Is Norbert ready to go?”

Hagrid nodded, pointing to a crate on one side of the room. “I packed him some rats ter eat on the way,” he said, pulling out an enormous handkerchief and blowing his nose, “an’ his teddy bear. Jus’ so he don’t get too lonely.”

Only Hagrid would get a dragon a teddy bear, said Ginny.

All right, Neville, think you can do the crate too? asked Harry.

I hope so. Neville began to repeat over and over his assertion that no one but the Pride or Hagrid would see or hear the crate or the dragon inside it. Just as he finished, there was another knock on the door.

Hagrid looked panicked. “It’s all right,” said Harry quickly. “Neville’s magicked the crate, no one will see it. It’s safe now.”

“We’re magicked too,” added Ron. “They won’t know we’re here unless they step on us.”

“Just don’t laugh,” said Draco.

Hagrid gave a small smile, as though laughing were the last thing on his mind, then went to the door and opened it.

Ron stared at the four men who entered. “That’s Lars Vilias!” he said, pointing at the second man in line, behind Dumbledore. “The Minister of Magic!”

Do we know him? Draco asked Harry, pointing at the last man in, who had tawny hair, glasses, and walked with a limp. He looks familiar.

Harry frowned, studying the man's face. He did look a bit familiar. Hold on, they'll introduce themselves.

"Hagrid, I'm sure you know of Minister Vilias, if you do not know him," Dumbledore was saying.

"Pleasure, Minister," mumbled Hagrid, shaking the man's hand. Vilias was not very tall, with dark hair and a small mustache and beard. He looked as if he would rather be anywhere else.

"Robert Tolamap, from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures." Tolamap, a big wizard with a flourishing beard beside which Minister Vilias' looked rather scrawny, shook Hagrid's hand rather more heartily.

"And Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office." Dumbledore indicated the man Draco had taken an interest in.

Harry shook his head. Don't think so, he said, as Scrimgeour shook Hagrid's hand. Maybe he looks like someone we know.

But what are they doing here? asked Ron.

"Pleased ter have yeh here," said Hagrid mechanically. "What's yer business with me?"

"Well..." Vilias began.

"There was a report of an illegal dragon on these premises," said Tolamap. "I'd like your permission to search the house, Mr. Hagrid."

"Go ahead," said Hagrid. "Yeh'll excuse me if I let Fang out while yeh do it?"

"Of course, of course." Tolamap drew his wand and began to open cabinets.

Hagrid looked directly at Harry as he crossed the room to the back door. Suddenly Harry understood – Hagrid was giving them a chance

to get Norbert out of the room. Even if Tolamap couldn't see or hear the dragon, sooner or later he was going to fall over the crate.

Grab the crate, he ordered silently. We're getting Norbert out of here.

But I want to see what's going on, objected Draco.

"Leave the door open?" Harry asked Hagrid, hoping Neville's magic would hold. "So we can get back in?"

Hagrid gave a small nod, his eyes on Tolamap, who was rummaging through his china, briskly but not ruthlessly.

"Does he really think Hagrid would bung a dragon in with his plates and stuff?" asked Ron as they heaved the crate out the door. Fang was already out, lifting his leg against a tree at the edge of the Forest.

"He doesn't know." Draco set his side of the crate down. "He has to look everywhere. Shall we head back in?"

They just beat Fang inside, and Hagrid closed the door with an expression of relief. Dumbledore was standing to one side, smiling slightly. Tolamap had moved on to Hagrid's closet and chest of drawers. Scrimgeour was muttering to Vilius. Harry caught a few words. "...waste of time... be done with it..."

"Come, now, Rufus, it's not that much time." Vilius mopped his brow with a polka-dotted handkerchief.

"Sir, with all due respect, you're exhausted," said Scrimgeour a little louder. "The meeting with the goblins this morning, and then with this news the reporters haven't let you have a moment to yourself all afternoon, you barely had time for supper before they were on you again – can't we get this over with? For your sake?"

"All right, all right. Anything, Bob?" asked Vilius.

"Nothing, sir," said Tolamap, emerging from under Hagrid's bed. "Except a few empty brandy bottles – you a heavy drinker, Mr. Hagrid?"

"I give it ter the animals," said Hagrid quickly. "Helps 'em get over colds an' stuff like that."

Tolamap shrugged. "Expensive way to do it, but who am I to judge? No dragon, sir," he said to Vilias. "Looks like those boys were wrong."

"Boys?" muttered Ron. "What boys?"

Will you tell us what's going on? asked Luna inside Harry's head.

No time now, said Draco. In a minute, if we can.

"Thank you, Tolamap, that's all," said Vilias. "You can go."

"Righto." Tolamap strolled towards the door. "Professor Dumbledore," he said, bowing slightly to the Headmaster. "Mr. Hagrid. Pleasure to meet you."

Hagrid grunted as the door closed behind Tolamap.

"Now, to business," said Vilias. "I'm terribly sorry about this, Hagrid, but I'm afraid something's got to be done. Attacks on students, now one on a teacher – I'm sorry, but this just can't go on."

Hagrid looked very nervous, Harry noticed. "But I never," he said imploringly. "Professor Dumbledore, sir..."

"I have told you repeatedly, Lars, that removing Hagrid from the school would have as little effect as removing me," said Dumbledore.

Scrimgeour snorted. "Are you claiming he was expelled for nothing, then? Be reasonable, Dumbledore, the man's record is against him, and there's nothing for him except your word – not that your word isn't worth anything, but against proven facts..."

"The proven facts in this case," said Dumbledore politely, "are that Hagrid was expelled from Hogwarts, has been employed here ever since, and has never in that time harmed a student. He has, in fact, saved quite a number of students in his years here. I cannot stop you

from doing what you perceive to be your duty, Rufus, but I can protest it. And I do.”

“Protest away,” said Scrimgeour testily. “He comes with us.”

“It has to be done,” said Vilius. “Has to. We’d be derelict in our duty if we didn’t do something about this.”

“Where’re yeh takin’ me?” asked Hagrid huskily.

“Just briefly,” said Vilius hastily. “And only as a precaution. You’re not being punished, Hagrid, we understand you’ve done nothing...”

“Azkaban?” whispered Hagrid, going white under his whiskers.

Harry felt fury rise in him. Ron growled. Draco’s hands balled into fists.

What are you all so mad about? asked Meghan. I can feel it.

They’re talking about sending Hagrid to Azkaban, said Harry. Shh, he added, wincing, as cries of anger and outrage flooded the link. They’re still talking.

“If you insist on continuing in this foolish course, Lars, there is no reason for me to remain,” Dumbledore was saying. “However, I must warn you, Hogwarts is an unusual place, where many curious and unexplainable things may happen. Things which are no one’s fault.” His eyes were locked on Hagrid’s. “And now, I bid you a good night.”

He turned and went out the door. Harry felt his stomach sink. If Dumbledore were deserting Hagrid, that must mean there was really no hope.

Dumbledore doesn’t think it was Hagrid attacking people, said Draco. And he’s never been wrong before.

“Come on, then, Hagrid,” said Scrimgeour, drawing his wand.

Hagrid snorted. “Yeh think I’m gonna fight?” he said, pulling on his moleskin overcoat.

“Merely a precaution,” repeated Vilius, raising his hands as if to calm both men. “Please, let’s try to keep this friendly.”

“Oh, sure,” said Ron. “I’d be right friendly to the blokes dragging me off to Azkaban.”

Shut up! Harry snapped. Remember? Hagrid can hear you!

Hagrid had indeed winced a little at Ron’s words. “Sorry,” said Ron quickly.

“Sall right,” muttered Hagrid.

“Sorry, what did you say?” said Vilius, turning back from the door.

“I said,” said Hagrid, raising his voice, “that if there should happen ter be anyone lookin’ fer some answers, they’d need ter follow the spiders. That’s all.”

Follow the spiders? Draco repeated, sounding confused.

“Oh yes, an’ Fang’ll need feedin’ while I’m away,” added Hagrid.

Vilius and Scrimgeour were trading baffled glances. Clearly, they had no idea why Hagrid was addressing these remarks to an empty room.

Neville, your magic works really well, said Ron.

That’s great. What’s happening?

Ow, said Harry, rubbing his temples. You don’t need to yell. Quickly, he brought the listeners up to date on everything, as Scrimgeour and Vilius escorted Hagrid out the door. He had just finished when a howl from outside sent all three boys running to the window.

What is it? demanded Ginny. What’s happening?

The howl was followed by a scream, and the beating of wings. Animals, said Draco. They’re being attacked by animals!

Vilius was flat on the ground, a grinning wolf perched on his chest, strangely visible in the darkness of the night. Scrimgeour was trying to ward off blows from the wings of a great black horse. Hagrid was nowhere to be seen.

He's probably scarpered by now, said Ron, laughing a little. This is great! Even the animals know Hagrid's innocent!

What kind of animals? asked Meghan innocently.

There's a wolf, and a black horse with wings, said Ron, as the latter knocked Scrimgeour over with the sweep of a wing and reared over him, screaming again. Why?

Oh, no reason. Meghan was laughing.

Ron bristled. What is so funny?

The back door of Hagrid's hut opened. All three boys whirled.

Moony walked in, as calm as if he broke into other people's houses every day. "Fang," he called, and the boarhound jumped up and ran over to him, fawning on him. He scratched behind Fang's ears, then came inside and picked up Hagrid's crossbow with a grunt.

"If there were anyone here," he remarked to the ceiling, "I'd tell them that there's going to be an inspection of Gryffindor Tower at five minutes past twelve. I'd also tell them that sneaking out will be extra-severely frowned upon from now on. However, tonight will be an exception, due to the Hypocrisy Agreement. And I would remind them that certain people might actually assist them in slightly extralegal affairs, if asked properly. That's all." He turned toward the door, then turned back. "Except that there'll be no need to feed Fang. Come, boy."

Fang followed at Moony's heel as he shut the door behind himself.

Harry let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Those weren't just animals," he told Ron, taking another look out the window.

Wolf and horse were gone, leaving Vilius and Scrimgeour to pick each other up off the ground. Neither was visibly injured, though both looked highly disgruntled. "That was Danger and Letha. In their Animagus forms."

Draco nodded. "I'd bet you anything Dumbledore asked them to do it."

Ron looked impressed. "Cool."

Harry checked his watch. "Come on," he said. "We've got half an hour to get Norbert up to the Astronomy Tower. I just hope Tonks isn't late..."

But she wasn't. In fact, she was waiting for them. Neville adjusted his magic once more to let Nymphadora Tonks see the three boys and the dragon in the crate as they heaved it up the final set of stairs, leaving bits of stuffing behind them from Norbert's much-abused teddy bear.

"Lo, Tonks," said Harry, catching his breath.

"Wotcher, you three," said Tonks, lighting her wand to reveal her spiky, bright blue hair. "Harry, Draco, I heard about Sirius and Hermione, I'm so sorry..."

Harry shrugged. "They'll be all right," he said without any real feeling behind the words.

"No word yet on what's doing this?" Tonks brought her broomstick over, and Harry and Ron heaved the crate up so that she could slide the straps of the harness under it.

"None," answered Draco. "The idiots at the Ministry think it was Hagrid."

"What?" Tonks looked astounded. "Hagrid? He wouldn't hurt a fly unless it bit him first. How could he be Petrifying people?"

Harry shrugged. "They tried to arrest him just now," he said. "But some of the animals from the Forest ran them off."

"Good for the animals." Tonks cinched the straps tight.

"You sure Charlie won't mind this?" asked Ron anxiously.

"Not a bit. We've even got a story ready – officially, I found this lad in someone's basement while I was making rounds in Bath. My mentor's a good sort, he'll back me up. He's the one who arranged for me to get the weekend off." Tonks mounted her broom. "Well, off to Romania. Don't get caught sneaking back in, now, that's the worst."

"We won't," promised Draco. "Good luck."

Tonks waved and kicked off from the stone platform. Norbert squalled in the crate as he rose from the ground.

"Should Neville take the magic off him now?" asked Ron.

"Good thinking." Neville! Harry called silently. Can you take the magic off Norbert and leave it on us?

Sure. But this is about all I can manage, I think. Even Neville's thoughts sounded tired. Are you coming in now?

Yes. We did it – Norbert's away!

Cheers echoed through the mental link as Harry led the way down the Astronomy Tower stairs.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron halfway down. "I meant to ask. What's the Hypocrisy Agreement?"

Harry and Draco sniggered. "We made a deal with the Pack-parents when we were about eight," said Draco. "We'll follow the rules if they do."

“That means they’re not allowed to get us in trouble for doing what they do themselves,” added Harry. “We’ve gotten away with loads of pranks that way.”

Ron groaned. “I want a family like yours.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” asked Draco innocently.

Everyone, get to bed, warned Harry as they approached the Tower. McGonagall’s coming in less than three minutes.

We’re going, answered Luna.

“Aubergine,” said Draco to the Fat Lady, who didn’t answer. Oops, he said silently. Neville?

Are you sure this is it?

Positive, said Harry. We’re right outside the portrait hole.

All right. Harry felt his friend make one final effort. Good thing I’m already in bed.

The Fat Lady blinked. “Gracious, where’d you come from?” she said to the boys.

“Around,” said Harry. “Aubergine.”

“You’re not supposed to be out so late,” warned the Fat Lady as she let her portrait swing open. “I should report you, you know.”

“Please don’t?” said Draco imploringly. “We were only gone a little while, and we won’t do it again.”

“Oh, very well, just this once.”

“Thank you.” Draco climbed through the hole after Ron. Neville and the girls were already gone.

I’m going to sleep, then, said Ginny. Nice work.

Thanks, said Ron. Good night.

Good night, echoed Harry. Sleep well, Ginny.

Thank you.

Was it his imagination, Harry wondered, or was the mental feeling of her words a little warmer than it had been before?

Elsewhere in the castle, a bottle of champagne was being opened.

"To a successful mission," toasted Danger.

"To a friend saved from an unjust fate," answered Remus.

"To the best prank we ever left Sirius behind on," said Aletha, her eyes sparking with mischief, and perhaps an unshed tear or two. "He'll be furious that he had to miss it."

"I have to admit, though, I'm curious," said Remus, taking a sip of his drink. "I'm curious how the boys got out of the castle, with this kind of security, and I'm curious why they went to Hagrid's. I'd ask them, but I doubt I'd get straight answers."

"You could ask Hagrid," suggested Danger. "He should know at least why they came."

"True. I can probably trail him tomorrow."

"Or you could just ask Albus where he is," said Aletha. "I highly doubt he doesn't know."

Remus grimaced. "True, but he can't admit to that knowledge to anyone, not even us. One whisper of that gets to the Ministry, or the board of governors, and he could be removed, for aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice."

Danger nodded. "And the last thing any of us needs right now is for Albus to be removed from the school."

“Not quite,” said Aletha softly. “I’m sure it’s just what the Heir of Slytherin needs.”

“Well, we’re not giving it to him,” said Remus firmly. “Albus Dumbledore is staying at Hogwarts, if we have anything to say about it.”

Three glasses clinked together in affirmation.

(A/N: WOW! I love my reviewers! You are all AMAZING! And I love questions in reviews as well, you know... I may not answer them, but I love them...

I shall try to get caught up on responses at the Yahoo group soon. To get there, go to my bio page, click on the link that says “homepage”, and then click on the blue word “Messages” on the left of the page. Scroll down until you find the message you want (most of mine are pretty clearly titled), then click on it to read it.

Four chapters left, everyone! Think I can do it before the start of September? And how did you like lucimpeds? They’re a family joke, if you ask really nicely I might even tell you about them...)

Chapter 34: Getting Answers

Aletha sat beside a bed in the hospital wing, glad that Poppy Pomfrey had barred student visitors for the last week, and would continue to do so for the rest of term. Meghan was well-behaved, but there was only so much temptation a nine-year-old could handle. Teachers were still allowed to visit, but she was the only one who did. Probably because she was the only one with actual family, rather than just students, who'd been Petrified.

Because of the way they'd been found, Sirius and Hermione remained side by side on the same bed, and would until the Mandragora potion could awaken them. "What did you see?" she wondered aloud, looking at them. "What frightened you so badly? You're both usually so hard to scare." Her eyes shifted to her husband. "What did you give pinkeye to? I bet, whatever it is, it still has it. When you curse something, Sirius Black, it stays cursed."

Her hands itched to touch her loved ones, but she kept them folded in her lap. She had felt the chill and hardness of the other Petrified people's flesh, very much like polished stone. She knew that if she touched her beloved or her Pack-daughter now, it would take a long time for her to stop associating them with that deathly chill, that unnatural stillness. Better to keep her distance and remember.

"Do you remember our wedding night?" she asked Sirius quietly. "Or I should say, wedding afternoon. We were still denning at nights. Remus and Danger took Harry and Hermione out, so we had the house all to ourselves. I remember how unsure you were. It had been so long, and you were still so weak. But we managed. I suppose you could say that's how our marriage has always been. Managing in spite of uncertainty."

If Sirius were awake, he would be making smart-mouthed comments by now, Aletha knew. He hated sentimentality and trips down Memory Lane. She grinned. This is my big chance, then, isn't it?

"I want you to know something. You're the most important person in my life. Not even Meghan is more important to me. If you were in trouble, in danger, I would drop everything and come to you. Well,

some things I might put down gently, but that's all the time I would take. All the best days of my life have you in them, at least peripherally. The day I found out you were innocent, the day I got you back, our wedding day, Meghan's birthday, the day you were acquitted... even you have to be seeing the pattern by now."

Great. He can't make the smart comments, so I make them myself.

She leaned forward. "And I want you to know one other thing. If that monster, whatever it is, had killed you, I would make certain Meghan was provided for, and then I would go after it myself. I would tear this castle apart if I had to, to find it and to kill it. And if anything ever does kill you, other than old age, I will do the same. You belong to me. I'm the only one with the right to kill you."

She shook her head, not really surprised at her constant jokes. He's obviously rubbed off on me after all these years.

"Remus misses you, you know. It's not just Hermione he was upset about. He thought you were pretty near invincible. Come to think, so did I." She sighed. "Which brings us back to our first point. What in the world did this to you?"

This is our "story without an ending", I suppose. At least right now it is. Aletha smiled reminiscently. Around the time they'd started dating, she'd found out that Sirius had never seen a movie. She had done research into London cinemas, found one that played old classics, then dragged him out one night to see *Casablanca* with her. He had complained all the way there, but when the lights came up, he'd had only one thing to say: "Can we do that again?"

"As Time Goes By" had been their song ever since. If they'd had a fancy wedding, that would have been what they had their first dance to. "You know, that's something we could do one of these days," she told him. "Have a big, fancy second wedding. Get married magically, to go along with the Muggle vows. Just for the fun of it. It would be nice to have a wedding with our own daughter as a junior bridesmaid."

She spent a little longer planning out their future, then talked to Hermione for a little while, relaying news of the Pride, assuring the girl she'd have no trouble catching up with the work she was missing. Even though she knew they couldn't hear her, it was somehow comforting to talk to them this way. She was reaffirming that they weren't dead, that they hadn't left for good.

Aletha's heart felt lighter when she finished. She blew Sirius and Hermione each a kiss before turning to leave.

They'll be underfoot again soon enough. Pomona says the Mandrakes ought to be full-grown by the beginning of June at the latest.

The thought put a smile on her face as she went down to lunch.

After the meal, she considered leaving by a side door, but decided it would be too mean to the small group obviously waiting for her by the great main doors. She stepped off the dais and walked along one side of the Great Hall absent-mindedly, as if she hadn't noticed them at all.

"Excuse me, Professor," said Harry as she got close to them.

Oh, what did they do now? Harry, Draco, Ron, and Neville all looked guilty, while the girls looked anxious, even Luna. "Yes?"

"May we speak with you privately, please?"

Proper grammar, and a please. This must really be bad. "Yes, of course. But don't you have class now?"

"Yes, Professor. I – I didn't mean now. Maybe after dinner?"

Aletha put her hands on her hips and studied the Pride. Either they've finally pulled something too big to get themselves out of it, or this is an act. Or it could be both. "After dinner is fine. I'll escort you up, and back to the Tower afterwards."

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry offered her a fleeting smile, then turned to the Pride, getting in on a whispered conversation between Ron and Neville. Aletha let her eyes rove over them for a moment, lingering longest, of course, on Meghan. Barred from the hospital wing and not allowed to roam the castle by herself, her Pearl had taken to spending days with the first year Gryffindors. Though she couldn’t do the practical lessons, not having a wand, she could listen to lectures and take notes, and answer questions, though Aletha discouraged this.

Bad enough to have her here, attending class even, when she’s too young. Worse still if she starts “showing off”.

Someone jostled her elbow. She looked around to see a Ravenclaw sixth year, smiling apologetically. “Professor? You’re supposed to take us to class.”

“I’m so sorry, Miss Clearwater, you’re quite right. I was daydreaming. Forgive me.” Aletha nodded to her class of Ravenclaw and Slytherin sixth years. “Come on, everyone, let’s see if I can do any better than my husband at keeping you safe. If everything runs true to form, it shouldn’t be too difficult.” She made her tone very dry, and was rewarded with a few chuckles and a handful of smiles.

If they see me laughing at it, they’ll feel more free to do the same. Which is good. They shouldn’t treat this as a joke, but neither should they let it steal all the joy from their lives.

The line of students moved off through the halls, snake-like. Would that make her the snake’s head, Aletha wondered whimsically?

She hissed experimentally, under her breath, and wondered what Harry would tell her she was saying.

I’ll have to ask him tonight.

Aletha shut the door behind Draco. “Spill it,” she said bluntly. “What’s going on?”

Harry took a deep breath as the Pride found seats. “We were at Hagrid’s,” he said. “The night he got arrested.”

Aletha sat down behind her desk. "Is this what you're so nervous about telling me?"

"Sort of."

"Why should you be? I already knew that."

"How—" Harry stopped. "Moony told you," he said. "But how did he know?"

"How did he know?" Aletha shook her head. "Harry, he saw you. All three of you," she added to Ron and Draco. "Standing in front of the window with your mouths open like baby birds waiting to be fed."

"But he can't have seen us!" protested Ron. "We were hidden!"

Aletha frowned. "Hidden? How? He said you were standing in plain sight."

"Nice," muttered Draco to Ron.

"Oh, like you've never said something and wished you could take it back," retorted Ron, whose ears had gone pink.

"I might have made a mistake," said Neville from the corner of the room where he was occupying a large armchair, playing cat's cradle with Meghan.

Aletha turned to him. "What do you have to do with – never mind. I don't want to know. Do I?" she asked Harry, who shook his head. "Though I'll probably end up knowing in any case, and we're not exactly short on time..." She sighed. "All right. Tell me. No punishments unless absolutely necessary."

Neville explained about the new talent he'd discovered. "I used it first the night Colin Creevey was Petrified," he said. "I just wanted to look in on Harry and Meghan..."

A small mystery resolved itself in Aletha's mind. "I saw you, didn't I? In the doorway of the hospital wing?"

Neville nodded.

"But I wasn't sure if I was seeing anything or not." Aletha brushed her finger along the edge of a quill. "So. I saw past your magic, at least partly, and so did Remus. But no one else seems able to. Correct?"

Another nod.

"It might be something about the Pack," mused Aletha. "Maybe our magic and yours overlaps, since we're sworn by the same oaths..." She pulled herself back to the moment with a jerk. "Enough. Time for magical philosophy later. Is that all you wanted to tell me?"

Harry shook his head. "Hagrid said something before he left," he said. "He told us that if we wanted answers, we should follow the spiders."

"So we've been looking for spiders," said Ron, with an expression on his face that indicated he hadn't been a very willing participant in this quest. "But we didn't see any until this morning. And they were headed towards the Forbidden Forest."

"And Moony said you might be willing to help us with some things," finished Draco. "We're none of us crazy enough to go out to the Forest alone."

A round of fervent nods.

Aletha repressed an urge to laugh. "Do you want me to go with you, then?" she asked with a straight face.

"What we'd really like," said Harry, his eyes on the floor, "is a chance to talk with Hagrid. Really talk, and find out what he means about the spiders."

"We'd write to him, but it's too risky," said Draco. "Someone might intercept the letters. Besides, he might not be able to get a hold of ink

and quill, wherever he is. And it's hard to keep things straight, asking a lot of questions in a letter."

"You think writing to him would be more risky than visiting him?" Aletha kept her tone level. "And why would you think he's even nearby?"

Ginny, silent until now, raised her head. "Hogwarts is Hagrid's home," she said. "He loves it here. I don't think he'd go very far. There are caves in the mountains near here. He could live in one of those, and hunt in the Forest for food for him and Fang."

"There could even be somebody at the school helping him," added Luna. "Sending him packages with food. If you know the house-elves, it wouldn't be hard. They love to feed people."

"That explains why you think he's nearby. Not why you think paying him a call would be a better idea than writing. You could send him writing things, if you think he doesn't have any."

"But we'd have to write a lot of letters to get the answers we need," said Harry. "And a lot of letters take a lot of time. The Heir of Slytherin could Petrify more people, or kill them, if we don't get answers soon."

Low blow, Harry. But Aletha stayed calm. Her Pack-son had a good point. Still, there was something he hadn't thought of.

"Before this, the Heir had an alibi," she said. "Hagrid had free access to the school. It could have been him – I'm not saying I believe it was, or I would never have done as I did. But it could have been. Now he's gone. He's not in custody, but there are precious few ways for a man his size to sneak into Hogwarts. If the Heir Petrifies or kills anyone now, it will be obvious to everyone that Hagrid's innocent, and that will start the hunt all over again."

The Pride looked at each other, exchanged grudging nods. Draco flashed a signal to Harry, who gave him the go-ahead.

"A lot of letters still means a lot of owls," he said, fixing his grey eyes directly on Aletha. "And wizards notice owls. They might notice if a lot

of owls kept coming to one place, and think maybe there was a person there. But if we visited, we'd only have to go once, and no one would think much of a family out for a weekend excursion."

Most people think in straight lines. But you, little fox, you think in corkscrews.

We may have need of that before we're through.

"You make a good point, Draco. But—" Aletha raised her hand, cutting off an incipient celebration. "Nothing's settled yet. I do not know, myself, where Hagrid is. It is possible I know someone who knows. If I do, and if that person will take you there, his hiding place is to be a den-secret, is that entirely clear? One word, one hint that he's anywhere near here, and the Ministry will be here in droves. Is that entirely understood?"

A ragged chorus of "Yes, Professor," and "Yes, ma'am."

"I will let you know if and when anything is to happen. Now come on. It's time you were all in the Tower." Aletha got up.

Luna looked up at her. "Thank you, Professor Freeman-Black," she said politely. "I like you a lot."

"Thank you, Luna. That's very nice of you."

"The house-elves like you too," said Luna, following her out into the corridor. "But some of the students call you rude names. Did you know?"

Aletha glanced behind her. Luna looked completely unaware that she was saying anything out of the ordinary. Draco appeared to have received all of her awareness in addition to his own, as he was slowly strangling himself with his school tie. "Yes, I knew. Some people are rude to Muggle-born witches and wizards."

"It's very foolish of them," said Luna. "The only people who have muddy blood are the ones who've been attacked by Hemogoblins." She treated them all to a discourse about Hemogoblins, where they

lived, how they attacked, and how to ward them off, all the way back to Gryffindor Tower.

Aletha pulled Draco aside for a moment while the rest of the Pride climbed through the portrait hole. "Problem?"

The blond boy sputtered, then managed to say, "She believes these things!"

"Yes. And she probably always will. I know you like her, fox. You'll need to make up your mind about whether you can keep liking her, even when she says odd things in public and makes herself, and the people with her, look a little foolish. If not... no law says you have to keep liking her. But you've sworn to her as a Pridemate, and that I think you're pretty well stuck with."

Draco looked insulted. "I'm not about to stop liking her! I just wish..."

"You wish she didn't. I know. She may grow out of it, or she may not. Be prepared for either outcome, although I think the latter is the likelier. Do you want my advice on how to deal with that?"

Draco nodded.

"Learn to laugh about it. And take a lesson from the lady herself. She doesn't seem to care what anyone else thinks of her. We could all use a bit of that."

Draco looked at the floor, then back up at Aletha. "Do you ever get tired of being right?"

"Hasn't happened yet." Aletha kissed his forehead. "Behave yourselves, if that's possible. Good night."

"Night."

Draco climbed through the portrait hole, and the Fat Lady's portrait swung shut. "Fine children you have," she remarked to Aletha. "Some of the most promising I've seen. They'll make great witches and wizards one day."

“Yes.” Aletha smiled crookedly. “If we can keep from strangling them first.”

The next weekend found Harry and Draco following Moony up a trail outside Hogsmeade.

“Did it have to be just us?” asked Harry as they walked, ignoring Draco’s elbow to his ribs. “Couldn’t Ron or the girls have come?”

Moony sounded somewhat impatient when he answered. “This is illegal and unwise enough already, Harry. It’s unusual for parents to visit during the term, doubly unusual for them to ask to take their children away from the school for brief periods, and for those requests to be granted is practically unheard of. If I were to ask to take someone else’s children along as well, and that were to be granted, someone would hear of it and protest it. And if they found out where we were planning to go...”

Harry grinned at Draco and interrupted. “The sky would fall.”

Moony stopped and turned around. “Are you trying to imply that I’m a chicken, Harry?”

Harry shook his head vigorously, biting his lip hard so as not to laugh and spoil the moment. Draco had his most innocent expression on. “You’re not fooling anyone,” Moony said to him. “And one more remark from either of you, and this little expedition heads straight back to Hogwarts.”

But he sounded more cheerful than he had, and when he turned around again, Draco gave Harry the thumbs-up.

The path grew steeper as they got farther from Hogsmeade. It was nearly half an hour from the time they’d set out when Moony stopped again. “Back up a little, boys,” he said. “I need some room for this.”

Draco edged back, leaving Harry room to do the same. Moony transformed and shook back his mane. Harry felt excited. Was Moony going to roar to tell Hagrid they were nearby?

But instead of a roar, the sound that came from Moony's mouth was a strange wail that reminded Harry of Moaning Myrtle, although it was several octaves deeper than her usual noises. It made all the hair on Harry's arms stand up.

From somewhere nearby came a dog's howl. Moony retransformed and beckoned them forward.

"That was scary," said Draco with deep feeling.

"Thank you." Moony looked rather smug.

The cave where Hagrid was staying was around several twists and turns more of the path, but the entrance was hard to see unless you were looking for it. Fang charged at the visitors as they entered, barking happily, and Hagrid got up to greet them.

"Wonder if yeh could do me a favor, Remus," he said to Moony. "Fang's picked up fleas, livin' rough..."

"And you didn't think to get your umbrella. I can handle that. Oh, and this is for you." Moony took off the backpack he was wearing and extracted a large box. "From the kitchens, with love."

Hagrid's eyes gleamed. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Don't thank me, thank the boys. They insisted on coming to see you." Moony walked towards the entrance of the cave, Fang following him. "We won't go far, but this spell's easier when I can see what I'm doing."

"All right," said Hagrid, sitting down on the floor of the cave. Harry and Draco copied him. "What can I do fer yeh, then?"

"We wanted to know what you meant when you said to follow the spiders," said Harry. "What would we find if we did?"

Hagrid sighed. "That. I was afraid it'd be that. Goes a long way back, this story does. Back ter when I was in school. Back ter the reason I got expelled in me third year."

"They thought you'd opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Draco.

Hagrid stared at him. "How'd yeh know about that?" he demanded.

"We found a diary," said Harry. "It had the story written in it. It was written by a boy named Tom Riddle."

Hagrid's fists clenched. "Tom Riddle. Ay, he'd write that story down. Right proud, he was. Proud of catching me. Sneaking Slytherin. No better'n You-Know-Who, that one. Don' think he ever told the truth in his life."

"Did he lie, then," began Draco, but Hagrid cut him off.

"He said I'd opened the Chamber o' Secrets! I was Slytherin's Heir! More likely ter be him than me, but he was the prefect, the bes' student o' the year, an' I was just a big blunderin' oaf like I am now, an' it were his word against mine. An' he went an' told everyone about the monster he'd seen me with, an' how he'd nearly got it, but it got away from him..."

"Was that true?" asked Harry quickly.

"What? Yes, that was true, but I never got what he saw from no secret chamber!" Hagrid picked up a rock lying nearby and began to crumble it into gravel. "That was Aragog he tried ter murder. An' Aragog was terrified o' Slytherin's monster, whatever it was. He'd never tell me."

The boys looked at each other nervously. Draco asked the question. "Hagrid, who's Aragog?"

"Aragog's who yeh would've met, if you'd've followed the spiders. He's an acromantula. Hatched him myself, I did, right in the castle. But he never hurt no one." Hagrid turned away, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "That poor little girl..."

"Acromantula?" mouthed Draco.

“BIG spider,” Harry mouthed back, spreading his arms as wide as they’d go. “What little girl?” he asked aloud.

“The one who was killed, las’ time the Chamber was opened. They found her in a bathroom, lyin’ there starin’ at the ceiling, stone dead.” Hagrid looked back at them. “I know yeh got no reason ter believe me...”

“We believe you,” said Harry, making up his mind.

“Yeh – yeh do?”

Draco nodded. “That’s the other reason we wanted to come and talk to you,” he said. “We were sure it couldn’t really be you.”

Hagrid swept them both into a bone-crushing hug, which fortunately only lasted a few seconds. “It’s good ter have friends,” he said, smiling at them. “Isn’t it?”

“Sure,” gasped Harry, recovering his breath. “Sure, it’s great to have friends.”

They talked a little while longer, giving Hagrid the greetings of the Pride, but when they offered to tell him the news at the castle, he shook his head. “Already know it,” he said proudly. “Dumbledore himself’s been visitin’ me. Keepin’ me up ter date on things. He wasn’ too happy ter hear about Norbert.” He looked rather sheepish. “I knew it weren’t a good idea, but I just couldn’ pass up an opportunity like that...”

“The man from Control of Magical Creatures said something odd,” said Draco. “Something about boys. Like boys had told him that you had a dragon.”

“They did – oh, that’s true, yeh wouldn’t know. They had two letters o’ complaint about me, down at the Ministry. From a pair o’ second year Slytherins.”

“Probably Nott and one of his toadies,” said Harry in disgust. “Do you know their names?”

"Nott was one of 'em. But the other was yer cousin, Harry. The Dursley boy. An' they said specifically they'd seen a dragon in me house." Hagrid looked confused. "Unless they saw him in the firs' couple'a days, I don' see how they could've. Neville had him hidden after that."

"Unless they lied," said Draco. "Slytherins are good at that."

"But how would they have known?" asked Harry. "And why would Dursley do something like that? I thought he was on the outs with Nott and his gang."

Draco shrugged. "Maybe Dursley bought his way back in by telling them about Norbert."

Moony came back into the cave, Fang lolloping at his side. "One defleaed dog," he said, presenting Fang like a master of ceremonies might. "And I put a spell on his collar that should keep them away for a couple of months at least."

Hagrid got to his feet again. "Yeh didn't have ter do that."

"It was no trouble. And it'll be easier for you." Moony shook Hagrid's hand. "I'm afraid we have to get going. Danger and Aletha send their best, Hagrid."

"An' I send mine right back. That was some neat work they did." Hagrid chuckled. "I'd bet Scrimgeour won't ferget that night in a hurry."

"I bet not," said Harry, grinning up at Hagrid. "Bye, Hagrid."

"Bye," echoed Draco, who looked slightly more somber.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Harry as they started down the path.

"Harry, Hagrid could be lying."

"About what?"

“Not opening the Chamber. He could have made all that up.”

“Draco, everything else fits about it... wait, you never saw Riddle’s memory, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. Why?”

“Because the monster Riddle surprised there did look like a big spider. And all the spiders we’ve seen have been running away from the castle, towards the Forest. Wouldn’t they do that if there was a really big spider in there? One who could protect them?”

Draco thought about this for a second. “Moony?” he called.

“Yes?” answered Moony over his shoulder without breaking stride.

“You’ve been out in the Forest in lion-shape sometimes, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever met anything like a really big spider out there?”

“Not met, but I know they’re there. There’s an entire colony of acromantulas in the Forest, actually. I assume this has something to do with following the spiders?”

“Yeah,” said Harry when Draco didn’t answer.

“I’m just as glad you didn’t. Acromantulas are vicious. They can speak and reason, but they’re more likely to eat you than talk to you. Still, if Hagrid had done something for them, they might respect him enough not to eat his friends.” Moony sounded doubtful.

Harry seized the moment to ask what he hadn’t wanted to ask Hagrid. “Can acromantulas Petrify people?”

“Hmm.” Moony seemed to be giving the matter serious thought. “I don’t believe they can,” he said finally. “They do have a paralyzing

venom, but paralyzed is different than Petrified. Easier to cure, for one thing. Besides, if an acromantula were the monster that's been Petrifying people, we would have found marks on their bodies where they were bitten. No one's been marked at all."

Harry glared at Draco, who raised his hands in surrender. "Fine, you win," he said, but Harry could see a smile sneaking onto his brother's face, and couldn't stop one from coming to his own in return. Hagrid was innocent. He'd never opened the Chamber of Secrets, he'd never done anything worse than raise an enormous, bloodthirsty spider in Hogwarts...

Well, all right, that's not so great. But it's better than Petrifying and killing people.

The walk back to Hogwarts didn't seem nearly as long as the walk up. The rest of the Pride was overjoyed to hear that Hagrid was innocent. They had to be overjoyed quietly, though, as the new rules meant the common room was so crowded that they couldn't go down to the Hogwarts Den. Even stealth mode wouldn't get them past the three fifth-years standing right by the entrance. So they had to have their conversation in a corner of the common room. It helped, of course, that Fred and George had chosen tonight to liven things up by releasing a dozen fairies in the common room, forcing the Gryffindor prefects to chase them down with nets.

"So let me get this straight again," said Ron. "Not only was Hagrid's monster not the monster from the Chamber, but it was scared of the monster from the Chamber?"

Harry nodded. "But it would never tell Hagrid what the other monster was."

"Almost like Voldemort," said Meghan, ignoring the shudders that ran through Neville and the Weasleys. "The way people are even afraid of his name."

"And Hagrid's monster was a big spider?" asked Neville. Harry and Draco both nodded.

"It's nice that Dumbledore is going to see him," said Luna, as Percy and a fifth year collided behind her and fell to the floor, the fairy they'd been chasing zooming off gleefully. The rest of the Pride stifled giggles.

"Wait a minute," said Ginny. "Harry, where did you say that girl was found again?"

"A bathroom," said Harry. "Hagrid said they found her in a bathroom. Why?"

Ginny made a face. "This keeps happening. I'll almost have a thought, and then it gets away from me."

"Moaning Myrtle lives in a bathroom," observed Luna.

"That's nice," said Ron, sounding bored.

Harry sat up straighter, feeling again the tingling rush of an idea, though this was more like an understanding. "You're right," he said. "It is nice. What if Myrtle is the girl who was killed?"

"What?" said Ron and Neville together.

"Think about it," said Harry, leaning forward, certain he was right. "Letha told me once that unhappy people are more likely to become ghosts. Myrtle's obviously not happy now. I bet she was like that when she was alive too. She probably went in the bathroom to cry..."

"And never came out." Draco was nodding. "It makes sense."

"So what should we do?" asked Neville.

"Move over," said a loud and bossy voice from behind him. Neville jumped and hastily moved. Percy, looking hot and cross, stepped into Neville's place and netted the last fairy, which had been sticking out its tongue at him, obviously thinking itself out of reach. "And then go to bed. It's too crowded down here, and it's getting late."

"Who put a wand up his bum?" muttered Ron as Percy strode away.

“He was born with it, I think,” answered Ginny, twitching her eyebrows.

Heads turned all over the common room to see who was laughing so loudly.

Professor McGonagall had been escorting the Gryffindors to breakfast every morning since the new rules went into place, so Harry wasn't surprised to see her in the common room the next morning. However, he was surprised by the grim look on her face.

“Is everyone out of your dormitory, Potter?” she asked him.

Harry looked around, seeing Dean and Seamus on the hearthrug, and his Pridemates talking with the girls near the back of the room. “Yes, Professor.”

“Your attention, please,” Professor McGonagall called out. “I am afraid I have some bad news to report. As of this morning, Professor Dumbledore has been suspended from his position as Headmaster.”

Whispers broke out everywhere. Harry felt as if the rug had been Summoned from beneath his feet. Dumbledore's gone?

“Why?” asked a seventh year.

“Has someone else been attacked?” called another voice.

“Who's going to replace him?”

“Is the school going to close?”

Professor McGonagall lifted her hands for quiet. “The reason for his suspension is none of your concern,” she said rather sternly. “No one else has been attacked, and there is no reason to suppose anyone will be. The school is not going to close. And no one will be replacing Professor Dumbledore, because he will be back as soon as the charges against him prove groundless. Now. Our day-to-day routine continues as usual, and I expect good behavior from all of you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Professor,” rang throughout the room.

“Good. Follow me, then.”

“We’ll ask Letha,” Harry told the Pride on the way down to the Great Hall. “We’ll wait for her right after breakfast.”

But this proved not to be necessary. Letha was waiting for them at the entrance to the Great Hall. “I’ll see you all in my office after you’re finished eating,” she said bluntly. “We have things to discuss.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” muttered Draco as he watched his Pack-mother walk stiffly away.

He threw himself down on the bench beside the other boy. “Did you send one too?” he demanded.

The other boy looked up from his breakfast insolently. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked me to.”

“Why’d he ask you to?”

“Because he wasn’t sure if you were going to or not.”

“What? Why would he doubt me? You’re nothing to him! Nothing at all!”

The other rolled his eyes. “You almost didn’t, last time,” he said. “He had to tell you twice.”

“I just...” He scowled. “I just didn’t want to lie.”

The other didn’t deign to reply.

“I assume,” said Letha in the deadly quiet tones she almost never used, “that you want to know why Professor Dumbledore has been suspended.”

Harry nodded, almost timidly.

"He has been suspended because of a number of anonymous complaints. Complaints which stated that he knew the whereabouts of one Rubeus Hagrid, and was visiting him."

"Uh-oh," said Meghan under her breath.

"I can think of only one set of people in this castle who should know that. And I am looking at all of them right now. I am quite sure they would never send letters of complaint in that way. So it must have been someone else. But that someone else could not just pluck this information out of the air. They must have heard it somewhere." Letha fixed Harry with a glare. "I wonder where they could have heard it."

"We didn't tell anyone else," Harry protested weakly. "Honest, we didn't."

"You must have been indiscreet, then. Speaking where someone else could hear you." Letha sat back with a sigh, closing her eyes. "We're going to have to rethink a lot of things we do with you cubs," she said quietly. "Because a lot of what we did was based on trust. And now we can't be sure that we can trust you anymore."

Harry felt a nastily familiar sensation. He'd felt the same way the year before, after he'd made his mistake in Defense Against the Dark Arts, when Draco and Hermione had told him they couldn't trust him to be the alpha anymore. It was as if he'd been climbing stairs in the dark, and the last stair not only wasn't there, but was a step down instead.

"This will be all over the castle by tomorrow, I'm sure," said Letha, opening her eyes. "But don't help it along, please. Now come on. Back to the Tower with you."

Harry saw his own feelings mirrored on six other faces as he got up and turned around. Draco and Meghan showed it the most, of course, but Ginny's eyes were a little brighter than they should have been, and Neville looked again as he had for most of their first year, as though he were expecting a punch in the nose any second.

The mood in Gryffindor Tower matched their own. Everyone was scared and disheartened. Ron gave voice to the general mood around ten o'clock.

"Without Dumbledore, we're all doomed."

But they weren't doomed, at least not right away. Weeks crept by; spring began to give way to summer. Final exams were scheduled as usual, to begin on the first of June. There were no more attacks. Harry didn't dare mention what they had worked out about Moaning Myrtle to Letha, though. She'd probably think he was asking for more special treatment.

But he wasn't, Harry thought moodily three days before exams were supposed to start, poking at his eggs. He was just trying to help...

Ron poked him. He looked up. Professor McGonagall was about to address the school, and she was smiling.

"Good news, students," she announced, and the Great Hall erupted into cheers.

"Is Professor Dumbledore coming back?" shouted several people.

"Has the Heir of Slytherin been caught?" cried a Ravenclaw.

"Is Quidditch back on?" bellowed Wood. Harry looked away so no one would see him laugh.

Professor McGonagall let everyone scream themselves out before she continued. "Professor Sprout tells me that the Mandrakes are ready to be harvested. Madam Pomfrey, Professor Snape, and Professor Freeman-Black will be preparing the Mandragora Potion tonight. There is every probability that the person behind these dreadful attacks will be identified and apprehended by tomorrow morning."

The cheers were even louder this time. Harry joined in with a glad heart. By this time tomorrow, Padfoot and Hermione would be awake again, Hagrid's name would be cleared, and everything would be all right again.

"Did you hear?" said Draco, leaning across the table. "Letha's helping Snape make the potion!"

Meghan was beaming. "My Mama Letha is the bestest potion maker anywhere," she said.

"You know better than to say bestest, Pearl," said Harry, slipping his arm around his sister's shoulders for a quick hug. "Should we go say something to her?"

Draco shrugged. "Why not? She can't stay mad at us forever."

The three cubs hurried up the aisle when breakfast was over, just catching Letha before she left by a side door. "You're helping make the potion," said Harry, then wanted to kick himself for stating the obvious. Letha hated when people did that.

"Yes, I am. And I'm glad you're here. I have to tell you something." Letha pulled her pendants out of her robes. "This potion is very difficult to make. I'm going to need my full concentration. So I'm going to be turning off my pendants while I make it, so that I'm not distracted if one of you gets angry or upset." She smiled. "So don't go getting into any mortal danger, all right?"

"We won't," said Draco. "Promise."

The Great Hall was almost empty. Letha gathered them into a quick hug. "I'm still a little disappointed," she told them when she let go. "But it seems there was no permanent harm done, and you're young. You make mistakes. I will be glad when this year's over, though."

"Us too," said Harry.

"Go on, your professors are waiting," urged Letha, shooing them towards the main doors.

He spent the day thinking, and wondering, and worrying. What was it like, to be Petrified? Did it hurt? Would it hurt, if you got the full dose and were killed?

He'd seen someone die, once. It had been awful. It still made him feel a little sick to think about it.

Did he really want lots of people at Hogwarts to die?

Finally, when they arrived back from dinner, he snatched quill and parchment and scribbled a note. Eight words on the inside, two on the outside. Then he summoned a house-elf and told it to convey the note, and not to say who'd sent it.

He wondered how ten words could make him feel like such a traitor. While Poppy double-checked the ingredients they'd need and Snape locked the door of the dungeon, Aletha pulled out her pendants. "Cesso Nuntius Insignis," she said.

How much trouble can even they get into in a couple of hours?
"Meghan, we really shouldn't be here!" Neville protested.

"It's my last chance," Meghan shot back. "Mama Letha said not to heal anyone. So I'm not. I'm just going to look." She slipped between the screens which hid the bed with two occupants.
"Harry Potter, sir?" A house-elf appeared at Harry's side. "Grabe has a note for Harry Potter."

"Thanks," said Harry, accepting the note. It was addressed to him, but not in any handwriting he knew. He shrugged and went to sit by the fire with Ron. "Where's everyone else?" he asked.

"Don't know. Draco and Luna're getting an early start on den-night, but I haven't seen Neville or Meghan, or Ginny. What's that?"

"Note for me. A house-elf brought it to me." Harry handed it to Ron. "You know the handwriting?"

Draco lounged in a chair in the library, playing little snatches of tunes on his recorder, while Luna browsed through the books. She reached up and pulled an ancient tome off the shelf, and began to flip the pages.

"What're you looking for?" asked Draco, taking the pipe from his lips.

Luna didn't answer.

"Luna, is something wrong?"

Still no answer.

Draco got up and crossed the room, starting to get worried. "Luna, say something."

She looked up. "I think this might be important," she said.

"Meghan, he'll be better in a few hours," said Neville. He hated to see her like this, so obviously not crying.

"I know." Meghan sniffled. "I know," she repeated more firmly. "I'm almost ready to go. I just want to do one thing."

She bent and kissed Professor Black on the lips.

"Nope. Never seen it before. You going to open it?"

"Only way to find out what's inside."

Harry ripped the note open.

Draco took the book from Luna.

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land," he began to read aloud, "there is none more curious or more deadly..."

Professor Black's lips moved. A thread of sound came from them.

"Basilisk..."

It's a basilisk. It gets around in pipes.

There was no signature.

"Luna, this is it!" Draco stared at her, feeling a wild excitement. "This is the answer! This is what the monster is in the Chamber of Secrets! You found it!"

"I did? That's good."

Draco wanted to laugh. I swear, nothing ever gets her excited.

The door of the library slammed open. Harry and Ron burst through. "We know what the monster is," said Harry, who was holding a piece of parchment. "Read that."

"You read this," said Draco, holding out the book.

They traded.

Neville backed away. "Did you hear that?"

"Basilisk," Meghan repeated. "Isn't that a kind of monster?"

Neville nodded, but that wasn't what interested him. "Meghan, you healed him just a little bit with your Ravenclaw power, just by touching him!"

"Wow." Meghan pressed her hand to her chest. "Thank you, Rowena."

A quiet grating sound made them both whip around. Pandemonium reigned in the library of the Hogwarts Den.

"Spiders flee before it – that's why they've all been running away!"

"And why Hagrid's acromantula was so scared!"

"It kills by looking at people – that's why Padfoot did the Conjunctivitis, so it couldn't look at them!"

"And Colin looked through his camera, and Justin through Nearly Headless Nick!"

"And Siss didn't have anything, that's why it killed her—"

A section of the bookshelves swung out. Meghan and Neville tumbled out of a stone slide, breathless. "We know what the monster is," they babbled in unison.

"So do we," said Harry, helping Neville up. "It's a basilisk."

"How did you know?" asked Meghan.

Harry opened his mouth to answer and froze, as did everyone else.

His pendants had just gone very, very cold.

(A/N: And the climax begins! Did I get everything? I think I did. Phew, this is hard work! And the only rewards I get are the satisfaction of a job well done, and your reviews, which make it all worthwhile!

All will be revealed in the very next chapter, so don't go away now! Oh, and I disclaim the quote from CoS, the "Of the many fearsome beasts" one. Also, the fact that our mysterious correspondent has seen someone die is actually a hint to his identity. Can you name him?)

Chapter 35: Names

“Ginny,” whispered Meghan, staring at her pendants.

Harry grabbed Ron’s shoulder just in time to keep his friend from collapsing. “Has anyone seen her since dinner?” he demanded. “Did she come back to the Tower with us?”

“I don’t know,” said Neville, shaking his head. “I don’t know.”

“I didn’t see her,” said Draco. “I know she was at dinner, but I just assumed she’d come back with everyone else.”

“How could she be in this much danger at Hogwarts?” asked Ron shakily, now holding onto the back of one of the chairs for support. “Unless—”

“The basilisk,” said Harry, feeling the pendants’ chill spread through his chest. “The Chamber.”

“We have to find her, then,” said Neville.

“How?” demanded Draco. “We have no way of knowing where the Chamber is—”

“That note said the basilisk uses pipes to get around,” said Harry. “Where are there pipes at Hogwarts?”

“In the walls,” said Neville. “Water pipes. The plumbing.”

“That’s what we never asked Hagrid,” said Draco suddenly. “What would a monster be doing in a bathroom?”

Ron nodded jerkily. “Unless it had to be there,” he said. “Unless the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is in—”

“Come on!” shouted Harry, already halfway out the door.

“Wait,” said Luna, in a curiously penetrating voice. “This way will be faster. It leads to the hospital wing.” She pointed to the slide Meghan and Neville had come out of. “We must hurry.”

Harry had never agreed with her more. The Pride piled into the stone tube in a mad rush. The magic pulled them upwards one by one, until they were all standing by the fireplace in the hospital wing, with the candles burning low and the last rays of sunlight creeping in the windows.

“Thank you, Rowena,” said Meghan, and the tube’s entrance sealed itself off. “We found it out by accident,” she said as they ran out the double doors. “Maybe there are others in other places.”

“Shush,” said Draco. “Save your breath.”

They piled up a flight of stairs, Ron in the lead. He froze as they turned a corner, giving Harry déjà vu as he just barely avoided crashing into his friend.

The writing on the wall outside Myrtle’s bathroom still gleamed in the torchlight. But there was a new message now, written under the old one.

Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.

Ron moaned. “Ginny...”

“Stop it,” snapped Harry. “You’re not helping.”

“You’re right,” said Luna, still in the same tone as before. Harry looked at her and wasn’t surprised to see her eyes unfocused, half-shut. “He cannot help you now. None of us can. You must go into the Chamber alone, and soon, Harry Potter, if you wish the lynx to see the dawn.”

Alone.

The cold in Harry’s chest settled around his heart.

“Don’t make enemies when you can make friends,” added Luna. “And remember what your alpha mother told you.” She blinked twice, rapidly, then looked at him with her usual expression of mild surprise. “Are you going to save Ginny, then?” she asked in her normal tones.

Harry took a deep breath, and felt his pendants shift with the movement.

Ginny’s my Pridemate. My friend. How could I not try to save her?

“Yes,” he said. “I am. Come on, everyone.”

He laid his hand on the brass doorknob of Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom and opened the door.

Myrtle was sitting on top of the stalls. “Oh, it’s you again,” she said sullenly. “What do you want now?”

“I wanted to ask you something,” said Harry. “How did you die?”

Myrtle brightened immediately. It was obvious she’d wanted to tell someone about this for a very long time.

“It was terrible,” she said confidingly, swooping over to Harry. “It was right over there, in that stall.” She pointed. “I’d come in here to hide, because Olive Hornby had teased me about my glasses. I was crying when somebody came in. I heard the door shut. Then they said something. I didn’t understand them, it sounded like a different language. But it was a boy talking. So I opened up the door to tell him to go away...” Myrtle lifted her head proudly. “And then I died.”

“Did it hurt?” asked Draco.

“No,” said Myrtle. “My whole body got all stiff when I saw the eyes, but it didn’t hurt.”

“What eyes?” asked Harry quickly.

“A pair of great huge yellow ones. As big as my hand. And then I was drifting away... but I came back. I wanted to haunt Olive Hornby, and make her sorry she ever laughed at my glasses.”

“I’m sure you did,” said Harry. “Where did you see the eyes?”

“Somewhere over there.” Myrtle pointed towards the row of sinks.

Harry drew his wand and lit it, bending over the sink in front of Myrtle’s toilet. The rest of the Pride joined him, inspecting the sink from every angle. It looked just like all the others – pipes beneath, then the basin, and the two copper taps –

“Harry.”

Meghan’s voice held urgency. Harry looked where she was pointing.

Engraved into the side of one of the taps was the carving of a snake.

“This is it,” he whispered. “This is the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.”

“What’re you going to do, slide down the drain?” asked Draco.

Harry closed his eyes and thought of stories in the back yard, kneeling beside a bin at the Apothecary, finding the Mirror of Erised in a darkened classroom...

“Open up,” he said, opening his eyes.

The tap with the snake on it glowed white. The handle began to spin. As the Pride backed hastily away, the sink dropped into the floor. Where it had been, a large pipe was exposed, bigger than any of the entrances to the Hogwarts Den.

“Or you could do that,” said Draco a little weakly.

Harry set his wand on the next sink over and hugged Meghan tightly. “I love you, Pearl,” he whispered in her ear. “Be a good girl.”

“I will.”

“We’ll see you soon,” said Luna, giving him a quick hug around the chest.

“I hope so.” Harry shook hands firmly with Neville, did the boy cubs’ shake with Draco, who was blinking very hard, then got to Ron. “I’ll bring her back,” he said, meeting Ron’s eyes straight on. “I promise.”

“I believe you.” Ron glanced back at the pipe. “Are you sure I can’t go with you?”

Harry looked at Luna, then back at Ron. “I wish you could,” he said. “But she said if we want Ginny to live, it has to be me alone.”

Ron nodded, his lips pressed tightly together.

Harry turned to Draco. “Get everyone back to the Tower,” he said, no longer one brother talking to another but an alpha instructing his beta. “Or maybe stay in the Den. It’s safer there, and it’s den-night anyway. As soon as Letha’s done with that potion, tell her what’s going on. She’s the only one who’ll believe you.”

“What about Moony and Danger?” objected Meghan.

Harry picked up his wand again, sat down in the tube, and glanced out the window. The sky was turning red with sunset. He looked over his shoulder at Meghan. “I don’t think they’re coming.”

He pushed off into the pipe.

Danger was laughing when it happened. Remus had just finished singing her one of the rudest songs ever written, which he imbued with great passion, despite assuring her with a perfectly straight face (and an open mind) that he had never experienced the activity the song so melodiously described. The combination of his operatic stance and expression and the utterly disgusting lyrics had left her rolling around on the bed, helpless.

Until the sudden sensation of cold, like the brush of a finger on the back of her neck.

“Oh God—” She sat up, willing her chain intangible to her clothes, so that it swung out free of them. She caught it on the return arc, noting the bright glow coming from the last pendant. The carving of the wolf cub shone with a steady light.

Remus cursed quietly, having just come to the same conclusion. “It would have to be tonight. And now.”

Danger looked up, meeting his eyes, and the knowledge in them. With Sirius Petrified, and Aletha incommunicado, they were the only ones who could help Harry.

And the full moon was rising.

“We have to call someone,” she said, half of her mind racing, the other half stalled. “Arthur and Molly—”

“They’re in London, having a date.” Remus diplomatically did not remind her that she’d recommended this to the Weasleys herself – he doesn’t need to, I can remember it fine myself.

“Gerald—”

“He’s in Manchester to meet an expert on heliopaths.” Remus closed the distance between them, pulling her to her feet. “And Minerva won’t be in her office to hear a firecall. She’ll be patrolling the corridors. You have to go. Lock me in somewhere, and go.”

“No!” Danger yanked her hand free of his. “I won’t do that to you!”

“Not even to save Harry?”

“Stop it!” Danger heard the hysterical overtones in her own voice and clenched her fists, fighting off panic. “I have to decide this for myself,” she said, mildly surprised that she was still standing. She was shaking all over. “I have to decide.”

Who do I help? My child, or my husband?

Harry could be in any kind of danger, anything at all. I might not be able to help him at all, or I might make the difference between life and death. Or he might get out of it himself.

Remus probably won't die if I leave him now. The transformation will hurt him, and he'll harm himself, possibly badly, but he probably won't die. But the real danger is to others. We're not really set up to contain a werewolf. He might break out. That would be worse than anything.

Except Harry dying. That would be a total disaster.

Help me, she begged the universe at large. What do I do now?
The Pride gazed down into the pipe for a moment after Harry was out of sight. Then Draco turned away. "Come on, everyone, let's go," he said.

"I'm not going," said Ron.

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. I'm staying here."

"You can't go after him."

"I'm not going after him. But I'm not going back to the Tower, either."

"You have to!"

"Let him stay," interjected Neville. "It's his sister down there. You'd do the same, if it was Hermione. Or Meghan."

Draco made a noise of utter frustration, then glared at Ron. "If you die, I'll kill you."

"I'll remember that."

The rest of the Pride hurried out of the bathroom. Ron was left alone, staring at the pipe.

His pendants hung against his school robes. One carving on each side of his second one glowed brightly.

It wasn't at all like going to the Den. This pipe was damp, for one thing, and smelled of mold and mildew and other nasty things. There were branchings and twistings all around, though the pipe Harry was sliding through remained the largest. He was tempted to shout and see what kind of echoes the place had, but half-remembered stories stopped him.

"Your best ally is the element of surprise." That was what Padfoot always said when he was telling them a story about a battle, or writing one. As long as his enemy didn't know he was coming, he, Harry, had the advantage.

"Know your enemy." That was another of Padfoot's sayings. Unfortunately, Harry had no idea at all who his enemy might be.

Other than the Heir of Slytherin.

But whoever he was, he was putting Ginny's life in danger. No one threatened the Pride and got away with it.

The pipe twisted once more, then dumped Harry out onto a slimy stone floor. He got to his feet and held his lit wand over his head. He was in a huge stone tunnel, with water dripping from the ceiling and sliding down the walls. Probably under the lake somewhere.

There was only one way to go. Harry set out, trying to ignore his heart hammering against his ribs. Any movement at all, he told himself, shut your eyes. It can't kill you with a look if you don't look at it.

But it could still bite me in half, part of him argued.

Shut up.

The tunnel twisted and turned. Harry kept against the inside wall, checking quickly around each corner before he turned it. All that he ever saw was more tunnel, until finally it ended in a solid wall, carved with a pair of entwined snakes, whose eyes were enormous emeralds.

He smiled grimly. A similar decoration, though not quite so gaudy, had inspired his first ever use of Parseltongue.

For one instant, he was four again, flush with victory against a larger opponent and childishly certain that nothing could harm him if he could just find his Pack...

But then I wanted something locked. Now I want the opposite.

“Open,” he said.

The wall separated into two halves, which slid back silently to allow Harry passage. He whispered, “Nox,” putting out his wand, because there was light here, a dim and greenish light, coming from nowhere that he could see. Huge pillars, each with another stone serpent twined around it, rose on either side of him. He started walking, wincing as his footsteps echoed off the stone walls.

He knows I’m here now, if he didn’t before.

He squinted through as small an opening in his eyelids as he dared, ready to shut his eyes instantly if he should see movement. Twice he did, only to realize that his nerves had made the carved stone snakes seem to be moving. Ahead, there were only more pillars, with something huge looming up in the distance. A statue, Harry saw as he got closer, a statue the height of the Chamber.

It’s ugly, was his first thought as he tilted his head back to look up at the statue’s face. The man it depicted bore a pronounced resemblance to a monkey. But it reminded him of someone else as well, someone he liked and trusted. His first thought, seeing the beard which fell almost to the statue’s feet, was Dumbledore, absurd as that was –

And then he saw what was between the statue’s feet, and all other thoughts flew out of his head.

“Ginny!” He ran to her, amazed and overjoyed that she didn’t seem to be hurt, she was just tied up and gagged – the Heir of Slytherin must

have left her here to try to scare her, he would get her loose and they would get out of here –

She was shaking her head vehemently, shrinking away from him, as he fell to his knees beside her. “It’s all right,” he said, setting his wand aside to untie the knot of her gag. “It’s all right, I’m here to save you–”

The gag fell away. “Harry, no, it’s a trap,” Ginny babbled, staring past him. “Run, save yourself, it’s you he wants, please go...”

Harry turned to look where she was looking and nearly fell over. Of all the people who could have been standing in the shadows of the Chamber of Secrets holding a wand on him, the person who was there was not one he would have picked.

“Percy?”

“Surprised?” said Percy, and Harry shuddered. He had never heard Percy speak like this before. He was usually brisk and no-nonsense, rather like his mother – this tone was chilling and full of malice. “You shouldn’t be. Or didn’t you know–”

Percy’s face twisted, as if he were fighting himself. “Harry,” he choked out, in something resembling his usual voice. “Harry – take Ginny – run – don’t know how long I can fight him–”

Harry tore his eyes away from Percy’s writhing form. “What’s going on?” he asked Ginny in an urgent hiss, fumbling at the ropes holding her arms.

“Percy’s been possessed,” whispered Ginny, staring at her brother, who was clawing at his own face, uttering strangled cries. “The diary, Harry, Tom Riddle’s diary, it’s evil – and Percy’s had it all year – Riddle’s been possessing him, making him do things – it’s Percy who’s been opening the Chamber, only it wasn’t, it was Riddle, using him – except once he didn’t...” Her voice broke in terror. “Once he used me... I Petrified Hermione, Harry, Hermione and Professor Black, that was me! I did that!”

“No, Riddle did that,” said Harry, starting on her ankles. “Like you said, he used you. He’s the Heir of Slytherin, then?”

“Yes.” Ginny was rubbing her wrists, trying to get life back into them. “He took my wand, I don’t know what he did with it...”

“We’ll just have to run for it,” said Harry, undoing the last loop of the knot. “Can you run?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to. Yes.”

“Where’s the basilisk?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen it—”

Harry pulled Ginny to her feet. Hand in hand, they sprinted up the Chamber of Secrets.

“Expelliarmus!” shouted a voice after them. Tom Riddle’s voice.

The spell hit Harry in the back, knocking him over on his face as his wand flew out of his hand. He couldn’t shout, the fall had knocked the wind out of him, but Ginny didn’t need instructions, he could see her running desperately for the door –

“In the name of Salazar Slytherin, I bid thee close!” hissed someone behind him.

The doors slammed shut almost in Ginny’s face as Harry caught his breath and got painfully to his knees, then to his feet. Knowing what he would see, he turned around.

Tom Riddle stood in the center of the Chamber, looking exactly as he had in the memory Harry had seen in the diary – tall, handsome, smiling slightly. It was not a nice expression. Percy lay unmoving on the floor to one side, his glasses several feet away.

“So,” said Riddle, his eyes fixed on Harry. “Harry Potter. We meet again.”

“What did you do to him?” asked Harry, pointing to Percy.

“Oh, don’t be alarmed. He’s not dead. Yet.” Riddle’s smile grew. “But I couldn’t let him fight me that way. Not after we’ve done so much together.”

Harry heard Ginny’s footsteps behind him, then felt her presence at his shoulder.

“We’ve been together all year, or most of it. There was that little hiatus after Christmas, but no matter. He’s desperately lonely, did you know that, Ginny? Percy feels very much alone. I mean, Bill and Charlie have each other. So do the twins. And you and Ron have all your little friends. But who does Percy have?” Riddle laughed, a high-pitched, chilling sound that made Harry shiver. “No one. Other than a silly Ravenclaw girlfriend, who broke up with him when he started ‘acting weird’.”

Harry licked his lips and felt behind him. His hand encountered cloth, then flesh, and Ginny grabbed on and held his hand tightly.

“And his family ridicules his cherished ambitions. He really should have been a Slytherin, you know. But he talked the Hat out of it. His family would never understand, he told it. Weasleys are always Gryffindors. And so he suffered for five years, cut off from those who would really understand him. Until I came his way.”

Riddle was starting to advance on them, very slowly. Harry backed away, matching him step for step, turning at the same time, pushing Ginny along. He didn’t want them to get backed into a corner.

“It was an accident, our meeting. My diary was originally supposed to go to another. But Percy confiscated it, and tested it for magical properties. When he discovered that his words disappeared as soon as he wrote them, he thought he’d stumbled across a gold mine. What better place to write down his fears and worries? No one would ever see, or know. But I saw. I knew. And when I judged the moment was right, I wrote back.”

Riddle laughed again. "He was very startled at first. I recall him asking if I were a ghost. No, only a memory, I told him. A memory of someone very like himself. I told him about how lonely I had been before I came to Hogwarts, how here, for the first time, I had found others like myself, who wanted to rise high and go far, who were willing to work hard and think differently to make that happen. I appreciated his struggle to make something of himself, while his father allows his family to live in poverty because of a foolish love for Muggles."

Ginny hissed between her teeth.

"I told him about how I had become a prefect, and how I hoped that I had been Head Boy, and he was thoughtful enough to tell me that I had. And while he was in the trophy room, he stumbled across my Award for Special Services to the School, and wanted to know all about it..."

"You lied," said Harry, feeling Ginny's grasp tight in his. "You lied about Hagrid opening the Chamber of Secrets. It was you."

"Of course it was. But Hagrid made the perfect scapegoat, don't you agree? Even I couldn't see everything – I hadn't foreseen that my fun and games would threaten the very existence of Hogwarts. I had thought there might be enough clear-thinking men on the board of governors to allow me to finish the work that Salazar Slytherin himself began."

"So you're an Heir of Slytherin," said Harry.

"I am the Heir of Slytherin!" hissed Riddle, obviously offended. "There is no other!"

"No? What about Voldemort?"

Riddle's eyes narrowed, and there was suddenly a hungry red gleam in them. "This is why I was so anxious to meet you, Harry," he said softly, still circling towards them. "Because I wanted to find out more about you. How did you become The Boy Who Lived? How did you,

the very essence of ordinary, not only survive a Killing Curse, but reflect it back upon its caster, almost destroying Lord Voldemort?"

"What do you care?" asked Ginny shrilly. "You lived fifty years ago, a long time before Voldemort."

"Oh, no," said Riddle, shaking his head gently. "No, Ginny. I have lived at precisely the same time as Voldemort, every second of my life..."

He took a wand from his pocket. Harry pulled Ginny behind him, but Riddle turned away from them and began to write upon the air, his wand's traces glowing green.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE, he wrote, then waved the wand in a circle.

The letters rearranged themselves. Harry heard Ginny's gasp.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"I have always enjoyed games and puzzles," said Riddle quietly as the letters faded. "The name was my mother's last gift to me, I would not forsake it entirely, but neither would I keep the name of the filthy Muggle who left his pregnant wife without a cent for no crime other than that of being a witch. I needed a name worthy of the last Heir of Salazar Slytherin, the one who would finish his noble work, who would purify Hogwarts of Mudblood filth."

"Why did you Petrify Professor Black, then?" Ginny challenged. "He's a pureblood."

"He was in the way," said Riddle, looking down his nose at her. "Sheltering a little Mudblood like that, when he has no claim to her, other than being her Pack-father – oh, yes, I know all about your Pack, Harry." The word dripped derision. "Rightly named, for the animals that you are."

"I told him," whispered Ginny, her voice catching. "I told him about the Pack, and the Pride – I'm so sorry, Harry..."

“You didn’t know. It’s all right.” Harry heard the words coming from his mouth automatically. His mind was filled with hatred. The boy standing in front of him had become the wizard who had killed his parents, who had caused all the Pack’s suffering, who had saddled him, Harry, with a scar, a stupid name, and a destiny...

“Yes, Ginny told me about your Pack, and your Pride. How you swore oaths to one another, and how your pendants bring you to each other’s aid. So I had to plan. I needed to find a time when I could bring you here, Harry, you and only you, or perhaps a few of your friends. In that way, your pendants would help me, because they would bring you immediately to the aid of someone in trouble. But they also had the possibility to ruin everything. If your pendants had brought your – what is it you say, your Pack-parents? – running to the rescue, I would have been greatly displeased.”

“He’s still weak,” Ginny breathed. “He must not be able to fight well yet – he couldn’t fight an adult, someone good with a wand...”

“So I sent Percy out to the greenhouses, to tinker with the growth of the Mandrakes, and ensure that they reached maturity the day before a full moon night.” Riddle smiled. “Since Percy saw fit to tell me exactly why he disapproves so of his brother and sister’s friends. It’s no fault of yours, Harry. He merely doesn’t like your precious Moony.”

“I knew that,” said Harry harshly. His mind whirled. Moony – werewolf – silver –

He carefully lowered his free hand to his robes, thankful beyond measure that Ginny was on his left, and that they were circling Riddle in such a way that Riddle couldn’t see his left side well. He gathered a handful of cloth, as if trying to dry his palm, pulling the robes tight over his left hip, and thought hard at his dagger, belted around the waist of his trousers. Go through the cloth. Let Ginny take you.

He heard her slow intake of breath. Then she released his hand, and a moment later, he felt the blade begin to slide from its sheath.

At least she’ll have something to defend herself with.

“So. Having disposed of all your guardians – one Petrified, one busy with a potion, and two busy with the full moon – I can have a good look at you, at the famous Boy Who Lived.” Riddle shook his head. “And I am sadly disappointed. Truly, I believe it was luck that allowed you to live that night, Harry. How else could you have defeated the greatest wizard in the world?”

Harry met Riddle’s eyes, staring into them. “I didn’t.”

“You didn’t? Then how did you survive?” Riddle might have been teasing a little boy who was insisting that two and two made five.

“I defeated you,” said Harry, letting his anger and contempt show in his tone. “You’re not the greatest wizard in the world. Not even close. Albus Dumbledore is greater than you’ll ever be. Even when you were all grown up, you never dared challenge Dumbledore. You still don’t dare now.”

Riddle’s face was contorted in rage. “Dumbledore is gone from this castle, Harry Potter. I, the memory of a sixteen-year-old boy, remain. Who is the victor?”

“He’s not really gone!” shouted Ginny. “He never will be, as long as we remember what he taught us!”

Riddle sneered, and opened his mouth to answer.

Music filled the Chamber suddenly, a music unlike anything Harry had ever heard, and yet similar to something he had heard before. Riddle was staring around, unable to locate the source. It made all Harry’s hair prickle and his heart feel as though it were swelling in his chest. Ginny was squeezing his hand tightly; he could feel the music vibrating in the fine bones of her fingers.

A burst of fire appeared between Riddle and the two Pridemates. Out of it erupted a bird, a bird with beautiful crimson and gold feathers, singing its own song now, where Harry had once heard a faint echo of it singing along with many human voices, voices which were calling him and Meghan back into life. He knew this bird.

“Fawkes,” he breathed.

The phoenix flew directly to him and settled onto his right shoulder, the one opposite Ginny. It stopped singing and fixed Riddle with a beady gaze.

Riddle stared back at the bird. “A phoenix,” he said. “I should have known. Dumbledore would be the type to attach a phoenix. But what can a phoenix do? Besides die and be reborn. It has many powers, true, but none of them are warlike. You seem sadly outmatched, Harry Potter. A little girl even younger than yourself, and a pretty bird, against me.”

“Where is it?” breathed Harry to Ginny, barely moving his lips.

“In my pocket.”

“So, Harry, we never did answer that question,” said Riddle, smiling silkily. “How exactly did you survive, when we met – in my future, and your past? We met twice, Percy tells me. And twice you lived to tell your tale. How did it happen?”

Harry held out his right hand in front of him, palm down. “Touch me,” he said.

“What?”

“Touch me. Go on, do it now. Just a little touch, your skin on mine.”

Looking wary, Riddle moved slowly forward and extended a finger to touch Harry’s. As their skin brushed, pain shot through Harry’s scar, and Riddle jerked his hand back as though he’d been burned.

“That’s how I got away last year,” said Harry. “It hurt you to touch me, so I hung onto your arm and made you look at me while Danger killed the man you were possessing.” It wasn’t as hard to say, or to think, as it had been when he had first learned about it. “And when I was a baby? My real mum saved me then. She jumped in front of the curse you meant for me. That’s why I lived. Because she died for me. My

Muggle-born mother loved me enough to stop you killing me by giving up her own life.”

Riddle’s face was twisted, whether in anger or in disgust Harry couldn’t tell. Then the corners of his mouth curved up, and Harry realized that he was actually smiling.

“You seem to like to hide behind women, Harry. It’s a bad habit. So there really is nothing very special about you, then. Merely luck, and good protectors. But you have no protectors now. Unless you count little Ginny. She was pathetically easy to overwhelm, you know, she practically begged me to possess her...”

“Liar,” growled Ginny.

“So let us end it, Harry. You and I, here, together. My weapons against yours.” Riddle’s smile widened as he looked at Ginny, then at Fawkes. “The best that Dumbledore can provide his champion, against the best that the Heir of Salazar Slytherin can muster...”

He turned and walked back down the Chamber, towards the statue.

“That’s where it comes out,” said Ginny under her breath. “From the mouth of the statue. Harry, you should have this.” She pulled the dagger from her pocket. “I can’t use it.”

“I have Fawkes,” said Harry, looking up at the phoenix. “Just hold onto it. At least it’s something.”

“Speak to me, Slytherin,” hissed Riddle, “greatest of the Hogwarts Four.”

“You understand him, don’t you?” whispered Ginny. “When he speaks Parseltongue.”

“Yes.” Harry stared up at the statue. The mouth was indeed opening, and something was moving inside it...

He pulled his eyes away. "Split up," he said. "It'll have a harder time finding us. Try to stay out of its way as long as you can, and don't look it in the eye!"

"I know. Harry – be careful!" Ginny pressed his hand once, then ran across the Chamber and into the shadows on the other side. Harry backed into a pillar, moved around it, and shut his eyes tightly. Fawkes' talons pressed against him tightly for a moment, then the phoenix's wing brushed against his cheek as Fawkes took to the air. Harry opened his eyes just long enough to get a look at what lay before him – a long gallery, bounded on one side by a wall, on the other by the pillars. Then he clamped his eyes shut as he heard Riddle's Parseltongue command:

"Kill them."

"Which one first?" replied another voice, and Harry gasped in shock. Except for being much louder, it could have been Siss.

It wasn't her at all, that I heard that night – it was the basilisk!

"Either, it does not matter!" Riddle sounded impatient. "Do not question me! Do as I say!"

The basilisk must be female, Harry realized distantly. Male and female snakes sounded different. He would never have mistaken a male basilisk's voice for Siss.

A slithering sound, coming closer – the basilisk was coming for him. Tasting acid fear in his mouth, Harry began to run away from the sound, hands outstretched before him, trying to feel his way along – he could hear high-pitched laughing, Voldemort's laugh – why had he not realized who Riddle was at the first?

Harry crashed into a pillar and fell backwards, remembering only at the last second to keep his eyes shut. His glasses fell off and clattered on the stone. A shadow loomed over him – the basilisk, it must be, he was going to die –

A high, melodious cry, and a scream of agony, directly above him, and then something heavy slammed down on the stone six inches from Harry's head. He winced away from it, turned himself around, feeling for his glasses. His hand had just closed around them when he heard another musical cry, and a second scream, this one with words.

"Master, my eyes! My eyes!"

"I will heal you when this is done, as I did before!" shouted Riddle. "Forget the bird! Find the children! Smell for them! Kill them!"

Harry fumbled his glasses onto his face and opened his eyes, ready to shut them again if he had to, but he didn't. The basilisk, thrashing in pain above him, had bloody wrecks where its enormous yellow eyes had once been. Its greatest weapon had been defeated.

But it still has a nose to find us with, and fangs to kill us with...

Harry held his breath and backed away slowly. The basilisk was still snapping at Fawkes. "Stop trying to kill the bird!" shrieked Riddle. "I am your master! Do as I bid you! Kill the girl!" And before Harry could do anything to stop him, he had pointed his wand into the shadows. "Accio Ginny!"

Ginny came sliding out from between two pillars, her feet skidding on the floor as she fought being Summoned. Riddle grasped her arm and flung her towards the basilisk. "She is in front of you! Kill her!"

The basilisk lowered its head, opening its mouth, flicking out its forked tongue. It was moving closer to Ginny, closer, she was standing as though frozen –

It struck at her. Ginny leaped out of the way, then ran back in and drove Harry's knife into the side of the basilisk's head.

That won't do anything, Harry thought in frustration as the basilisk screamed again. We need some way to stop it for good...

Luna's voice echoed in his mind.

“Don’t make enemies where you can make friends...”

“HEY!” Harry yelled, running out into the middle of the Chamber. “Hey, you, big snake, over here!”

The basilisk reared up, confused. “You are not my master,” she hissed.

“And so he does not matter!” shouted Riddle. “He has told you where he is! Kill him!”

“No, wait!” yelled Harry. “What’s your name?”

The basilisk’s head wove a pattern in the air as she tried to make sense of the two people shouting at her.

“Names do not matter!” screamed Riddle.

“Then why’d you change yours?” challenged Harry, then turned back to the basilisk. “Look, my name’s Harry. The girl is Ginny. Who are you?”

“Names have a lot of power,” Danger had said, and so it seemed. The basilisk was visibly shaken.

“My name...” she began. “My name... it has been so long. So long since any called me by my name. It was given to me by my first master. I remember now. My name is Sangre.”

“Sangre,” said Harry. “That’s pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“Pretty, what does pretty matter to you?” snapped Riddle. “Kill them!”

Harry glanced at Ginny. She was staring at him fixedly. When she saw she had his attention, she made a hand-signal. I have something to tell you.

Come closer, Harry signed back. "I heard you talking once before," he said to Sangre. "When you were going through the school. You were hungry."

"Yes." The final sibilant was extended. "I am always hungry. I have eaten only the vermin that lair down here since I was awakened..."

"You can eat them, as soon as you kill them!" shouted Riddle.

"Quiet," hissed Sangre, whipping her head around towards him. "You are like a foolish bird that only knows one song. 'Kill them, kill them.' I wish to speak with this boy, with Harry."

Harry hid his jubilation. "I bet I could get you something to eat," he said as Ginny reached his side. "There's a Forest outside with lots of animals in it. You could even go out there and hunt for yourself."

"Go out? Leave the castle?" Sangre sounded intrigued. "I have never been outdoors. My master would never allow it."

"And your master does not allow it now," said Riddle, with an audible growl in his hissing words. "My patience wears thin, snake. Kill them, or be killed yourself."

"I do not care for threats," said Sangre, her voice acquiring a growl of its own. "And if I can smell them, I can smell you as well!"

She whirled and lunged at Riddle, who dodged and shouted a spell, pointing his wand at her. Harry and Ginny were momentarily forgotten.

"The diary," whispered Ginny, pointing. The little black book lay unnoticed on the floor beside Percy. "He came out of the diary, I saw it – if we can just get it..."

Harry was already sprinting across the floor. Sangre's tail lashed around him as she battled Riddle, almost flattening him twice, but he made it. He scooped up the diary and ran back the other way, back to where Ginny waited –

Sangre screamed again as a spell of Riddle's burned a huge cavity in her side. Ginny cried out in horror.

"And now I do the same to you!" shouted Riddle, whirling on them.

Harry snatched his dagger from Ginny's lax hand and stabbed it through the cover of the diary.

Riddle staggered back, howling inhumanly, as ink spurted from the diary like blood from a wound. But he wasn't finished – he was pointing his wand at Ginny, opening his mouth –

Harry wrenched the dagger out and stabbed the book the other way, making an X on the black cover.

Riddle's scream was worse than Sangre's. Harry would have clapped his hands over his ears if he hadn't been holding the diary. Ginny was, but from the look on her face, it wasn't helping much. Riddle was writhing worse than Percy had –

And then he was gone. In the silence that followed that dreadful scream, the only sounds were the dripping of ink from the ruined diary and Sangre's hoarse breaths.

Fawkes landed beside the wounded snake, crooning softly. Harry dropped the diary and ran over to her. "He's gone, Sangre," he told her. "You don't ever have to listen to him again."

"I would not in any case," said the snake heavily. "I am dying, Harry."

"It can't live through that," whispered Ginny, joining him. "Can it?"

"She says not." Harry felt his throat closing. This made two snakes this year who had died for him.

Fawkes cocked his head over the gaping wound in Sangre's side. Thick, glossy tears slid down the feathers of his face and fell into the injury.

Ginny gasped. "Look!"

Where Fawkes' tears fell, the burned tissue was mending itself. Sangre's flesh and bone was regrowing before their eyes, her green scales extending over it all.

"What is happening?" asked Sangre in confusion. "I feel stronger, not weaker."

"Fawkes is healing you," said Harry, unable to stop himself from smiling, and not wanting to. "The phoenix."

"The phoenix heals me? Why? We are enemies."

"Not anymore," said Harry. "Not unless you try to eat him, I don't think. He only hurt you to stop you hurting us."

Fawkes lifted his head. Sangre's side was healed. She ran her nose along it, inspecting herself. "Will you thank him for me, Harry?" she asked. "I cannot speak his language."

"Sure. Fawkes," said Harry in English. "Sangre says thank you. For healing her."

Fawkes chirruped.

"I believe that is 'You are welcome,'" said Sangre with good humor. Then her tone changed, became thoughtful. "It seems to me that I have heard the name 'Harry' before. Spoken by a small one of my own kind, or rather, cried out, just as I looked upon her."

Harry winced. "Her name was Siss," he said. "She was my friend."

"I am sorry," said Sangre. "I was obeying my master. I have known nothing else my whole life long. Nothing but my first master, and then many long years of dreams, and then this master, whom you have just defeated. He came once, and then went away, and I dreamed again a little while, and then he returned, though his voice was strange. Once he even sounded female. But just now, before I fought him, he sounded as he did the first time he came."

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s... kind of hard to explain.”

He looked around. Ginny was kneeling beside Percy, Fawkes perched on his other side. “I think he’ll be all right,” she said. “He’s alive, anyway, and he doesn’t look hurt.”

“Good.” But how are we going to get out of here?

“Harry,” said Sangre. “Was ‘Siss’ all your friend’s name, or was it a short-name for something else?”

“I’m not sure.” Harry thought back to his life in London, where he had first known Siss. The day she had introduced herself... “I think it was a short-name.”

“What was her full name, then?”

Harry closed his eyes, trying to remember what the thin green snake had told him her name was, while Meghan and Draco and Neenie and Padfoot played in the sun, and Letha worked in the garden...

“Sisseehh,” he said, opening his eyes. “Her name was Sisseehh.”

“Ahhh.” Sangre flicked her tongue out in a sign of contentment. “As I thought. I know that word. It was in the stories my first master would tell me, the stories of the outdoors. He promised that I would go there someday, if I was good.”

“It’s a word? I mean, like a real word, not just a name?”

“Of course it is a word. All names are words. They have meanings. Say it yourself and see what meaning comes to your mind.”

“All right.” Harry closed his eyes again. “Sisseehh,” he whispered to himself. “Sisseehh.”

An image floated into his mind. A delicate white flower on a thick stalk, surrounded by long green leaves...

Harry opened his eyes and smiled. "Come on," he said, standing up. "We should get going. Open," he hissed at the doors of the Chamber, which split and parted.

The person standing on the other side raised both eyebrows. "Do I even want to know?"

(A/N: No, it's not more trouble. You should be able to figure out exactly who it is. Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful review love – dare I ask for it again for this chappie? I dare, I dare!

Credit goes to MoriasDepths for the name Sangre. Thanks for letting me borrow it!

The story about lucimpeds was posted on the Yahoo group. Sorry I forgot to tell you. You can find it there, in the "Messages" section. It's titled "Lucimpeds". And review responses soon... I thought you might like an update more, though.

I disclaim the two intentional quotes from CoS in this chapter, which are what is written on the wall and what Riddle says to open the place where the basilisk is. If there are any other quotes, they are unintentional and I disclaim them too. As I've said before – if JKR wrote it, I didn't.)

Chapter 36: Agreements and Anticipations

"I followed her home," said Harry brightly, pointing to Sangre. "Can I keep her?"

"Well, that depends. Is she going to Petrify people?"

Harry shook his head. "Not anymore. Fawkes made it so she couldn't." He frowned. "Sangre, don't your eyes hurt?"

"The phoenix's healing stopped the pain," answered Sangre. "Who is the female who has just come? I can smell her."

"She's my nest-dam. Her name is Danger." Harry looked down at his hands. Why were they trembling?

"Come here, you two," said Danger gently, just as Sangre said, "Go to her, Harry. You are weary and frightened. She will help you."

Ginny was halfway across the Chamber already. Harry's legs were suddenly wobbly. He made them hold him up until he got to Danger's side. Why is this happening now?

"Shh," soothed Danger, stroking Ginny's hair as the girl wept into her robes. "It's going to be all right now. I think." She led Ginny to one of the pillars and sat down with her back against it. Harry half-collapsed beside her, now shaking all over. "It's a normal reaction. You didn't have time to feel any of this while it was happening, so you're feeling it all now that it's over. Just let it out." She put an arm around Harry, who leaned into her gratefully.

"Is it all right?" she asked him quietly. "As far as you know?"

Harry nodded. "The Heir of Slytherin's gone," he said. "It was Voldemort, but when he was young. He made a diary that could possess people. It's been possessing Percy."

"Percy, that's right. Is he here too?"

Harry pointed.

“Is he all right?”

“He’s alive,” said Ginny, raising a tear-splotched face. “And he doesn’t look hurt. But Riddle made him do horrible things.”

“Riddle?”

“Tom Riddle,” said Harry. “It was Voldemort’s name, before he was Voldemort.”

“All right. And what about the snake?”

“Her name’s Sangre,” said Harry. “She’s a basilisk. I made friends with her, and she fought Riddle for us. She wants to see the outdoors – well, not see, she can’t, not anymore, but go there. She’s never been. Do you think she can?”

Danger frowned. “She Petrifies by looking at things? Or she did?” Her eyes blurred blue for a moment, then cleared to brown again. “Oh. She kills by looking at things directly, and an indirect look – through something, or a reflection maybe – that Petrifies. I understand now. How did her eyes get injured?”

“Fawkes,” said Ginny. “He came and fought for us.”

As if hearing his name, the phoenix fluttered to a landing in front of them. Danger held out her hand, and Fawkes nibbled one finger in greeting. “Thank you,” she said gravely. “That was very kind of you, to help them that way.”

Fawkes gave a chirrup.

“I have an immense favor to ask you. I know you can travel through fire, and sometimes even take a passenger. Do you think you could take Sangre out to the Forest?”

Fawkes bobbed his head up and down.

“Harry, would you explain to her?”

"All right." Harry got up. "Sangre," he called. "Would you like to go outside?"

"Of course I would. But how will I get there? I would frighten people if I went through the castle."

"Fawkes can take you outside through magic. You can go out in the Forest, and hunt, and find a place to sleep..." Harry hesitated. "Is it going to be all right, though?" he asked Danger doubtfully. "What's Dumbledore going to say?"

"He says," said Danger, winking at Harry with one blue-brown eye, "that it's all right for the moment, as long as she promises not to hurt any humans. He'll want to have a talk with her later, if you'd serve as translator."

Harry nodded eagerly. "My nest-head says you can go," he told Sangre. "As long as you don't hurt humans."

"If that is the price of freedom, I will pay it gladly. There will be many other kinds of prey." Sangre flicked her tongue. "When will I go?"

"Right away, I think." Harry turned to Danger. "She says she won't hurt anyone," he said. "And she wants to go right away."

Fawkes trilled and opened his wings, lifting off from the ground. He soared through the air of the Chamber and landed on Sangre's back. Fire flared around phoenix and snake, and they were gone.

"Well, that's that taken care of," said Danger, standing up and helping Ginny to do the same. "You two had better get going. Ron's probably bitten all his nails off by now. He's waiting in the bathroom, you know."

"But how are we going to get out?" asked Ginny. "We can't slide up the pipe like we do for—"

"We can't slide up the pipe," interrupted Harry, hoping Danger hadn't noticed that Ginny was about to say something else. "And it's all slimy, I don't think we can climb it."

Danger smiled at them. "You'll find a way, I think. Go on, I'll be right behind you. Oh, and Ginny, your parents are here. Professor McGonagall's office."

Harry picked up the diary and pulled his dagger out of it, wiping it clean on his robes and pulling them tight over the sheath to put it away, then remembered something. "Our wands – mine and Ginny's – Riddle disarmed me, and we don't know where Ginny's is—"

Danger drew her own. "Accio Wands," she said.

Three pieces of wood zoomed towards her from three corners of the Chamber. She caught two of them, and Harry snagged the third, which was Ginny's. He handed it to her and claimed his own from Danger, who pocketed the third. "Now go," she said, making shooing motions. "Out."

Harry took Ginny's hand to help her along, and they left the Chamber together, walking back along the tunnel by the light of their two wands. Alone in the Chamber, Danger shivered a little.

I hope I can do this...

She started walking towards the still figure of Percy Weasley. His glasses, she saw in the dim greenish light, lay several feet away from him. She picked them up when she got to them and bent over him, putting them on his face, then sat down at the base of the nearest pillar.

"You can stop pretending you're asleep now," she said. "You do a very good impression, but you tensed a little when I bent over you. I know you're awake."

Percy drew a deep breath, but did not otherwise reply.

"I didn't really get a very good idea of what's been going on from Harry," Danger went on. "But one thing I think I understood was that whatever's been happening, it's not your fault. Am I right?"

Percy rolled onto his side, his back facing her. "Go away," he said in a muffled voice.

"No. Or if I do, you're coming with me."

"Why should I?" Percy sounded unusually young and scared. "If I leave here, I'll just go to Azkaban."

"The only place you're going is the hospital wing."

"I Petrified people! I would have killed my own sister!"

"Was that you, or was it the person who was possessing you?" Danger hoped she had the story straight. "Because that doesn't sound like something you'd do at all."

"But I let him. I let him possess me. I didn't fight hard enough – if I'd just been a little stronger, or smart enough not to write in the diary..."

"Was it really Voldemort who was using you?"

Percy winced at the sound of the name. "Yes."

"In that case, it's something close to a miracle that you were able to fight at all. Voldemort killed witches and wizards a lot older and stronger than you as a routine thing."

"He didn't want me dead," mumbled Percy. "Not until the end. He wanted me to keep acting normal."

"You know, most stories work better if you start at the beginning and tell them all the way through," said Danger as neutrally as she could manage. "I'll try not to ask stupid questions, and I promise not to jump to conclusions. I really do want to understand this."

Percy craned his neck to look over his shoulder at her. "You do?"

"Yes. I do." Danger offered him a small smile, hoping it looked natural, not forced.

Percy turned away again and sat up. "I didn't know the diary was magical at first," he said, still facing the opposite wall. "I confiscated it from a Slytherin in Ron's year, Dursley. You know him."

"Yes."

"I tested it for magic, and I found out that when I wrote in it the ink disappeared. So I started using it as a diary. I should have realized something was wrong when it started writing back. But Tom Riddle understood me. He understood what it was like to be embarrassed by where you come from, and he didn't treat wanting power like something shameful."

Percy sounded challenging, as if he expected Danger to scold him for this. Danger deliberately closed her lips over both her indignant and her reassuring response, and simply said, "Go on."

"I didn't know anything was wrong until after Halloween. One of my robes started to smell terrible, the same way Professor Snape did, and nothing I did could get it off. I finally just left it in the out-of-order girls' bathroom on the second floor. I thought no one would find it there."

Oh, now that's ironic. Left it where you picked it up. Danger knew quite well what had caused the smell on Percy's robes. He must have brushed against a patch of that potion the cubs brewed in there while he was opening the Chamber.

"I started worrying a lot about Ron and Ginny. Trying to keep them safe. Tom told me I was overreacting, that I shouldn't worry so much, that we're purebloods, we wouldn't get attacked. But the more I thought, the more I worried. I realized there were little gaps in my memory. Times when I didn't know what I'd been doing. One of them was on Halloween. One was the night before the first Quidditch match."

Percy looked at Danger, his eyes pleading. "I hexed Dursley's bat. To turn the Bludger into iron. I'm the reason Harry got hurt."

He looks as if he wants me to shout at him. Maybe he does. But I'm not going to. Danger kept her face and tone neutral, in listening mode. "Go on," she said again.

"I swore over Christmas that I wouldn't write in the diary again. But by then I didn't have to anymore." Percy looked miserable. "By then he could just use me whenever he wanted, as long as I had the diary. So I tried to get rid of it. I threw it away, right after I'd Petrified the Hufflepuff boy, Finch-Fletchley. And I grabbed my robes while I was there. They didn't smell anymore, and I didn't know why, but I needed them. I don't have a lot."

It's costing him to admit all this. He hates his family being poor, even though they're better off than they were.

"I swear I didn't know Ginny would pick up the diary! I didn't know he could use her the way he used me!" Percy was pale and sweating now. "When I saw her coming out of the bathroom, when I saw her face, I knew Riddle was using her – it was the way she smiled, the way she looked at me – Ginny never looks like that. I Stunned her. I took the diary back – I couldn't let her keep it. I put it away and said I wouldn't use it anymore."

"But..." Danger prompted gently.

"But I couldn't stop! I had to write in it – if I didn't, I kept thinking about it more and more, it was like an obsession – I couldn't tell anyone. Who would believe me? And if I told, they'd take the diary, and I'd go mad..."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me."

Danger nodded, forcing herself not to shake the boy. "Do you believe it?" she asked instead.

"I... I don't know." Percy swallowed hard. "I wrote the complaint letters," he said. "About Professor Dumbledore. I heard Luna Lovegood say something about it in the common room, and Riddle made me write a letter to the Ministry, and to someone else, I don't know who, arranging for other people to write letters..."

"Did you have anything to do with Hagrid's dragon?"

"No. I don't know who did that. It was someone who wanted Hagrid in trouble, to discredit Dumbledore, because he let Hagrid stay. The attacks were supposed to do it, but I'd thrown the diary away, so there hadn't been any attacks for months, and they needed something the Ministry couldn't ignore. When there was another attack right on top of the dragon..." Percy laughed bitterly. "That was just perfect."

"But you knew about the dragon."

Percy nodded. "Afterwards," he said. "Riddle thought it was funny, he wrote whoever did it a letter of congratulations – I just can't remember who..." He looked away from Danger. "This could all be wrong. I don't remember any of it, really. All of this is what Riddle told me, while he was making me bring Ginny down here. He was going to make me kill her and Harry, and then he was going to use me to come alive again. Take my life to feed his."

Danger wished she could hold Percy, try to comfort him and take the horror out of his eyes, but she knew he wouldn't take it well. "He didn't," she reminded him quietly instead. "None of that happened."

"I tried to fight him," Percy whispered, his eyes closed. "I tried to give them enough time to get away. But he was so strong, I couldn't fight hard enough – I thought I was going to die, I thought everyone was going to die, and it would all have been my fault..."

"You still fought. You still tried. That counts for something. And now it's over. Nobody's dead, and the Petrified people are waking up right now. And your parents are here."

Percy looked panic-stricken. "They'll hate me," he blurted. "They'll hate me for what I did, they'll say I was too stupid to be their son, they'll disown me..."

"They're out of their minds worrying about you," corrected Danger. "They want to see you and make sure you're all right. Your mother, especially. I don't think she's going to let go of you for at least an hour."

"You don't know that," said Percy dully, staring at the floor.

"Yes, I do." Danger made her tone very firm, because she was, in fact, quite sure of what she was saying. "Now come on. We're leaving."

He's used to listening to authority and not arguing, thank heaven – if this was one of the cubs, and an adult not of the Pack, they might well not come...

But Percy got up and followed her out of the Chamber, back along the tunnel, to the pipe they had all slid down to get here. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at a thin line of gold extending out of the pipe.

"It's how we're going to get out of here. Hold still." Danger lifted up a loop of her chain and passed it around Percy's waist. It joined onto itself seamlessly as Danger pressed it together. "Sit in it," she instructed Percy, looping it around herself and joining it. "Like a swing."

Percy edged the loop farther down himself and awkwardly sat. Danger twined her hands around the chain and gave it a mental instruction. Shorter.

Percy made a noise of surprise as the chain began to pull them upwards. Danger gave him a reassuring smile, before the first twist in the pipe meant she could no longer see him. Instead, she thought over what had just passed.

Deciding to stay with Remus until the moon rose had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. What had finally tipped the balance

was her recalling what Dumbledore had once told her about their Pack-magic – that it would bring the help that was needed, and bring it in time. Someone else would help Harry, if he needed help, until she could get there.

Or that was what she'd told herself, and what Remus had told her. She had sensed his relief at her decision, and his guilt for being so selfish, and had kept her mouth shut about both. Neither of them needed anything else to feel bad about.

I'll get to work in the morning on a safe room, he'd told her. So you're never caught like this again. It was his way of apologizing for her being caught at the moment.

The instant his transformation was complete, she had run for the Floo. She'd come in through the Gryffindor common room fire, and Draco had directed her to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Ron had been so thankful to see her that his response to her request to tell her everything had included a few things she didn't think he'd originally intended to tell anyone. For instance, what the cubs had discovered about the jewels in their pendants, and how they'd used three of them already.

And extrapolating from that, I thought my Hufflepuff jewel could be used to make my chain long enough to reach down here, and strong enough to take several people's weight at once...

She'd tied off her chain at the top, taken a loop of it in her hand, and begun to slide. Halfway down, she'd gotten two surprises. The first was Remus telling her he was in Hogsmeade, and the second was the metal in her hand losing its icy coldness and returning to normal temperature. She'd nearly been startled into dropping it. Instead, she'd yelled at Remus.

What do you mean, you're in Hogsmeade?

I didn't think it was that hard to understand. Remus showed her his point of view – the main street of Hogsmeade village, moving past him rapidly. I'm on my way up to the school.

Who's going to let you in?

You will. When you get back. Because it seems that Harry's taken care of whatever it was himself. Remus stopped, turning his head in response to something Danger hadn't shared with him. Or maybe Albus will.

He turned a little more, and Danger saw that sure enough, Albus Dumbledore had just Apparated onto a corner in Hogsmeade. Remus ran up to him and sat down beside him, and Dumbledore looked down gravely into the werewolf's eyes. Danger withdrew, so as not to be in the way while Dumbledore gathered what he needed to know from Remus by Legilimency.

She had arrived at the bottom of the pipe while this was happening, and been most of the way down the tunnel before Remus reported the arrival of Arthur and Molly Weasley, both of them highly distressed by the message they'd received from Minerva McGonagall at the restaurant where they were having dinner. From this, Danger had learned that not only Harry and Ginny, but Percy Weasley as well, were missing, and had feared the worst. Just because Harry was out of danger didn't mean Ginny and Percy were as well...

The chain had stopped shortening. Percy was climbing out of the hole in the wall above her. Danger waited until he was safely on the floor, then swung herself out as well and detached her chain from the pipes she had wound it around.

"Was it interesting down there?" asked Moaning Myrtle as the sink slid back into place.

"You could say that," said Danger. "This way, Percy." She led him down the halls, as if he were six rather than sixteen, until they reached the door of Minerva's office. She didn't bother to knock, instead pulling the door open and gently propelling her charge inside.

"Percy!" Molly Weasley ran to her son, flinging her arms around him.

"Mum," Percy mumbled, beginning to shake. "Mum, don't... you don't know, you don't understand..."

"We understand," said Arthur, embracing his son from the side. "Harry and Ginny explained everything. You were tricked, son. Taken in. It happens to the best of us."

"If You-Know-Who could put fully-grown wizards under the Imperius Curse, he could certainly do it to you," said Molly, looking up at Percy fiercely. "It's no more your fault than it was theirs."

Percy looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "You... you mean..."

"The only thing of which you are culpable, Mr. Weasley, is making a mistake," said Dumbledore, who was standing by the fireplace. "And if that were a crime, we would all be criminals. You will not be punished for this. To the hospital wing with you, and then, if you are feeling well enough, perhaps you will join us at the feast. I believe we have quite a lot to celebrate tonight."

You bet we do. Danger slipped out of the room, satisfied that everything would be all right eventually.

There was a party in the hospital wing with her name on it. Severus Snape, although he tried not to show it, was pleased. The Mandragora Potion was working to perfection. No sooner had Poppy Pomfrey administered it to the victims than they began to stir, as if awakening from a deep sleep.

He rather wished he could have had an excuse for the potion not to be used on Black, though. It was delightful to see the man, for once in his life, unable to make smart remarks. But he knew Freeman-Black would want her husband back.

Though why, I cannot fathom.

And so he watched as Black, like the rest, came awake, yawning and stretching, allowing Granger-Lupin to drop to the mattress beside him, where she too began to move. Freeman-Black stood beside them. Severus turned away, slightly sickened by her adoring expression.

Unfortunately, this put him in prime position to watch the doors of the hospital wing burst open. Shouting people raced past him – first year Gryffindors, second year Hufflepuffs, and a number of ghosts, here to congratulate Nearly Headless Nick, no doubt. And then, inevitably, the bunch of Gryffindors who more than any others made his life a misery.

But only some of them. Severus frowned, taking a quick head count. Four. Potter and both Weasleys were missing. Where would they be?

Black was hugging his wife and daughter both at once. Granger-Lupin was trying to talk to three of her friends at the same time, which with the loud conversations from three other corners of the room made for quite a lot of noise. Severus was the only one who noticed the animal entering the hospital wing, until it bounded past him and leapt onto the bed Black still sat on.

Granger-Lupin squealed in delight and embraced it. “Moony!”

The wolfish creature licked her once, then turned to Black, knocking him flat with its front paws on his chest.

“Gerroff me!” shouted Black, shoving it to the floor, laughing. “What, you wanna play rough? Fine!”

And where Black had been, suddenly a huge black dog sat, which sprang on top of the other animal and began to wrestle with it, growling playfully.

Severus sat down hard on the bed behind him as two insights struck him at once.

Lupin had come to Hogwarts to greet his restored friend and adopted daughter despite the full moon, no doubt taking advantage of his wife’s “taming” abilities.

And the dog which had once licked his face in public, which he had thought to be owned by Aletha Freeman, was none other than Sirius Black.

I had best remove myself from the premises before I murder him.

The Headmaster would not appreciate it.

He stood up and left, passing Potter and the two youngest Weasleys on the way out. He noticed that Potter and the girl were both covered in muck, but was in no mood to ask why. His mind was occupied with plans to repay Black. Most of them, he knew, were unfeasible, such as his idea of suspending Black naked upside down from the Astronomy Tower and leaving him there for several weeks.

But they were enjoyable to think about.

Explaining everything to everyone who didn't know about it took quite a while, and was accomplished partly in the hospital wing and partly at the promised feast, which lasted all night long.

"Can't even leave you people alone for two months," said Sirius in mock disgust.

"We owe you a lot," said Danger quietly. "If you hadn't hit the basilisk with that curse, you and Hermione would both have been killed."

"It's her you owe, not me," said Sirius, pointing at Hermione, down at the Gryffindor table. "I'd never have known what spell to use if she hadn't figured out what the thing was. We were just leaving to tell someone what she'd found out when we heard it around the corner."

Hagrid arrived at half past ten and lifted Ginny off her feet to make certain she was unharmed before giving Harry such a hearty pat on the back that he set a new fashion in strawberry trifle face cream. Fang joined Remus under the table, though it wasn't Fang who went around stealing people's napkins off their laps.

That's not very polite, you know, said Danger around midnight, looking down to see Remus curled up on a pile of at least thirty slightly stained serviettes.

You celebrate your way, I'll celebrate mine.

Dumbledore got up to explain to the school that he had been reconfirmed as Headmaster by the school governors. Danger knew from what he'd told Remus that the governors had been falling over themselves to do something about the kidnapping and possible death of two of Arthur Weasley's children.

Arthur's better respected than he knows.

Dumbledore also announced that, as a treat for the school after a rather harrowing year, there would be no final exams. The students went wild, all except Hermione, who looked disappointed. Danger nudged Aletha and Sirius and pointed, and the three of them all cracked up, with Remus sniggering as well from his place by Danger's feet.

Students kept coming up to tell Sirius how much they'd missed having him in class. "It's like being dead," said Sirius during a lull. "Only reversible."

Aletha hit him on the head with her soup spoon.

"I bet that was what you missed most when I was Petrified," said Sirius. "You couldn't hit me."

"No, only second most. This is what I missed most." Aletha wound her arms around him and took possession of his mouth for a long, heated kiss.

The students broke into cheers and wolf whistles. A chant went up from somewhere in the hall: "Snog! Snog! Snog! Snog!"

This from Sirius "I will never kiss a girl in public" Black.

When did he say that?

Fifth year. James asked him if that meant he'd kiss a boy in public. I'm not sure he ever found all his teeth.

Danger had to put her head down on the table, she was laughing so hard.

All in all, it was a memorable night.

Albus Dumbledore met with the basilisk Sangre the next day, with Harry Potter as interpreter. They came to an agreement. Sangre would remain in the Forest, fairly far from the school, both to avoid any unwanted contact with humans and to keep herself from accidentally being killed by a crowing rooster. Dumbledore offered to restore her sight, with spells to keep its lethal effects at bay, but Sangre refused.

"Magic can be broken," she said in her hissing voice. "And if Harry tells me true, my former master remains in the world. I will not be used as a weapon again. I can hunt well enough with my nose alone to keep myself fed."

"As you wish," said Dumbledore, bowing to her.

Harry and Sangre experimented, and found that shouts in Parseltongue traveled over greater distances than would have been expected. "Simply further confirming that Parseltongue is a very magical gift, Harry," said Dumbledore as they were walking back up to the school together, with a place for Harry and Sangre's future meetings established. "You see, in Muggle terms, snakes are deaf."

Hagrid reported that Aragog and his colony were a little unhappy about the Forest's newest occupant, as were the centaurs and the unicorns, but they all settled down when it became clear that she was not interested in killing for killing's sake, nor in hunting any of them specifically, and really wanted nothing more than to be left alone.

Harry visited Siss' grave at the edge of the Forest, and wasn't surprised to see that the flower Neville had planted there was a lily. He kept what he had learned about her name to himself. It was his and Sangre's secret.

Another meeting was held that day, this one involving Meghan Black, her parents, Andromeda Tonks, and Poppy Pomfrey.

“What you did to your father could be dangerous, Meghan,” Poppy told the girl. “Not this time, but in the future. And not to him, but to you. You didn’t mean to heal him, did you, not even a little?”

Meghan shook her head. “It just kind of happened,” she said.

“And an unscrupulous person could force it to ‘just kind of happen,’” said Andromeda. “If they were ill or wounded, they could force you to heal them, just by touching you. You need to learn to control this power, and you need to learn all the usual methods of magical healing. If you have other tools to use, you’re less likely to need your power.”

“Don’t ever get dependent on it,” advised Sirius. “If you depend too much on one thing, someday you’ll be in a situation where it doesn’t work, and you won’t have any other options.”

“But you said you’re leaving at the end of this year,” protested Meghan. “I can’t come back until I’m a student, if you’re not here.”

Aletha smiled. “Don’t count your dragons before they hatch, pretty Pearl,” she said, kissing the top of her daughter’s head. “Tell me this. If you could come back again and learn from Madam Pomfrey, would you?”

“Of course!”

“Then you will,” said Sirius. “And then, when you’ve left Hogwarts, you’ll probably be able to take an accelerated version of Healer training. Right?”

“I’d think that could be done,” said Andromeda. “You could be finished in three years, or even two, if you prove you have the knowledge and the skills that you need.”

The enraptured look on Meghan’s face was all the reward the adults needed.

The rest of the term went by quickly. Classes were still held, but the teachers were less strict than usual about homework, since there would be no exams. The students spent a great deal of their time

enjoying the gorgeous summer weather. Remus and Danger visited the school often, lazing about on the grounds with the Pride or chatting with Sirius and Aletha.

Percy Weasley was seen everywhere with Ravenclaw Penelope Clearwater on his arm. Not even his twin brothers' teasing could bother him these days. He had all his old confidence back and then some.

"Couldn't have left him down there, could you?" Fred asked Danger one day.

George nodded. "He's worse than ever."

"Don't be so sure," said Remus, who was having a stone-skipping contest with Sirius. "He might yet surprise you."

Dudley Dursley was questioned about his part in the attacks, since Percy had admitted to confiscating the diary from him. He claimed he had just found it in among his things, and had no idea how it had gotten there. He had known it could write by itself, and had been laughing, the day it had been taken, at jokes it had been writing for him. He had no recollection of any blanks in his memory and showed no trace of being possessed. It was decided that he bore no responsibility for what had happened.

He sat down on his bed and twisted a scrap of parchment. "It's all your fault," he said moodily. "If you'd just been a little quicker about getting in with them, you could have pulled it off the way you were supposed to."

"How was I supposed to know he'd take it?" retorted the other, piling books into his trunk. "And I was working on getting in with them. I did pretty good getting the Weasley girl to feel sorry for me. Another week or so, and I could have gotten it to her easy as anything. And she's not even one of the ones who was supposed to be nice to me." He pulled out a creased sheet of parchment.

"Don't read from that damn letter you found again," said Theodore Nott wearily. "I know what it says. They're supposed to be nice to you

if they can, and watch out for me. And I know we were going to use that to get you in with them, so you could pass it off to one of them. But that's not how it worked, is it?"

"You thinking about turning me in?" challenged Dudley Dursley.

"No."

"Good, 'cause I can tell on you if you do. I can tell them how you had Crabbe and Goyle push me down in King's Cross to plant the diary on me, so no one would be able to trace it back to your father."

"Shut up, Dursley."

"And I can tell them how your father gave Hagrid that dragon egg and had us write the letters to the Ministry. Even though you 'didn't want to lie.'" Dudley forced his voice into a little-boy whine for the last few words.

"Shut up, I said."

"And how you knew it was Percy Weasley being possessed, because he ordered you to use that spell at the dueling club, and you obeyed him..."

"Shut up!" Theodore was on his feet, fists clenched. "Shut up, shut up! Someone could be listening!"

Dudley mocked his tone. "'Someone could be listening.' Someone could always be listening. What are they going to do? Arrest us? We're kids. They'll think we're just fooling around. They always do. You shut up for a while. Sissy." He went back to packing his trunk.

Theodore stomped out of his dorm, glowered back at the entrance for a good minute, then threw himself into a chair in front of the fireplace.

I'll never be the son my father wants. Half the time I hate what it is that he wants from me, and the other half I do it wrong.

He glared at the spot where Draco Black had disappeared into the wall in their first year. He suggested I do that, get them to bring Black here to the common room. And it went all wrong.

And this year he made me lie for him. And it was because he told me to obey whoever gave me orders that I cast that spell at the dueling club. Now the whole school thinks I don't have any honor.

He stared into the fire. And I don't. Not really. Not after sending that note to Potter.

I hate my life.

Neville got a letter on the last morning of school. He opened it and scanned it, and his face lit up. "Harry! It's from Gran – she said yes!"

Harry whooped, startling several owls into flight. "Yes!"

"Said yes to what?" asked Meghan from down the table.

Neville smiled at her. "I can stay the whole summer with your family!"

Meghan squealed in delight. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because we weren't sure about it until just now," said Draco through a mouthful of sausage.

"May I assume this means your gran's letting you come?" asked Letha from behind them.

"Yes, ma'am," said Neville, turning around.

"If we're going to be in the same house for the summer, you'd better drop the ma'am. Call me Letha, the way these bafflebrains do."

The cubs all made faces at her.

"That's excellent news," said Padfoot, coming up behind her. "It means we'll have even teams."

"Teams?" asked Hermione. "Teams for what?"

“Well,” drawled Padfoot. “Since you lot keep on getting yourselves into trouble, we thought we might as well teach you a little about getting out of it. We’re going to be running war games.”

“War games?” asked Ginny. “What’s that?”

“We split you up into teams,” explained Aletha, “and give you a scenario where you might have to fight. Indoors, outdoors, attacking, defending, that sort of thing. It’s your job to outthink and outfight the other team.”

“We’ll teach you the basic spells to use,” said Padfoot. “They won’t hurt, but they’ll leave a mark where they hit, so we can check your accuracy. When all your opponents are ‘dead’, your team wins.”

“But learning new spells is definitely advised,” added Letha. “Learning to craft objects to help yourselves, likewise. We’ll provide the reading and the raw materials. The more your team studies, the more advantages you have.” This was addressed to Hermione, who was looking distinctly panicky.

“No fair,” said Ron. “Whoever gets her has the biggest edge.”

“We’ll be shuffling you around, never fear,” said Padfoot. “New teams every couple of days. Sound like something you could enjoy doing for a summer?”

“Yeah!” said the Pride almost in unison, most of them grinning hugely.

“Bet we can use whatever we learn on Fred and George,” muttered Ron to Harry as Padfoot and Letha went back to the High Table. “Turn them orange or something.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Harry took a gulp of milk and belched.

“That’s disgusting,” said Hermione.

“Good one,” said Draco.

Ginny and Meghan giggled.

Harry sighed happily. I love my Pride.

Severus Snape returned to his quarters after getting the last of the Slytherins on the train to find a mysterious box on his desk. There was a note on top of it.

With thanks for a job well done, SB

He frowned, nonplussed. SB. I know an SB, but I cannot think for what he would be sending me a thank-you gift...

Perhaps for the potion. But his own wife and Poppy Pomfrey had to do with that as well. He would be far more likely to send gifts to them.

And any gift he gives to me is likely to be booby-trapped.

But I am no booby.

He began to investigate the package in every way that he could, and ended up more baffled than he'd started. There was no evidence that the contents had been altered in any way. In fact, there was no trace of magic on them at all, besides the normal traces one would find on a magically-made product. The box and its wrappings, too, were free of spells.

Cautiously, in case he had somehow missed one, Severus unwrapped the brown paper from around the box.

The label of Honeydukes Sweetshop met his eyes. Underneath the store's logo was written Dark Chocolate Truffles. The seals on the box were the original Honeydukes seals, showing no signs of tampering.

Severus could wait no longer. Just the smell from inside the box had started his mouth watering. Defiantly, he tore it open, picked up one of the confections, and took an enormous bite.

Whatever you have done to these, Black, I do not care. You spent the money, and I plan to take full advantage of it.

He waited the rest of the day for something to happen.

So what did you do to that candy you bought for Snape? Aletha asked Sirius through her pendant chain as they flew above the Hogwarts Express, waving at the students, who had their heads all out their compartment windows to look up at their teachers on the flying motorcycle.

Nothing.

Nothing?

Nothing. And that's the best prank I could have played on him. He'll be all suspicious about it, test it twenty ways from Sunday – he might not even eat it, he'll be so suspicious. And he doesn't have to be. It's his favorite kind of candy, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with it.

How did you know his favorite kind of candy?

It's amazing what house-elves notice.

Aletha laughed aloud, the wind past her face through her open helmet whipping the sound away. So what are we going to do with all this free time, now that we're no longer teachers?

Oh, I have an idea or two for me. How about you?

I've got something in mind. But this isn't the best place to talk about it.

Mine neither. Who do you think Albus will get to replace us?

I have no idea, said Aletha innocently.

Nor do I. Sirius chuckled mentally. How do you think they'll do?

Just fine, I'm sure. They might even have better luck keeping the cubs in line.

Ha.

Below, the train wove its way south like a glittering red serpent.
Danger napped on the couch in the living room, taking advantage of the last peace and quiet she was likely to have for the next year (Remus' banging around in the basement didn't count), and dreamed of whirling colors and ringing words.

O warrior woman, speak to she

Whose name is stars and royalty,

Of those whose minds and souls are caught

In pain-made traps of bodies wrought.

Her thoughts are right, and good her goal,

But she has not the answer whole.

The badger's son, his lady bright,

Both wander now in endless night,

And from that night they must be freed.

The eagle's daughter help shall need;

From badger's younger son, whose heart

From hers shall ne'er be torn apart;

And from the other lions young,

The help of hand and voice and tongue.

And this I tell you now as well;

The lion's son, with whom you dwell,

Calls eagle's daughter "sister"; yet

Their blood is nothing like. But let

That pass for now, it matters not.

Your task must never be forgot;

For Pack and Pride, to great renown,

Must one day bring the darkness down.

Far to the north, a man struck a rock wall, over and over, with another piece of rock. He had been doing it constantly for more than two and a half years. Unsurprisingly, the wall where he worked was pitted and chipped, with a sizable hollow at floor level, almost large enough to fit a can of soup into.

In less than two months' time, that hollow would change hundreds, even thousands of lives.

But that's another story.

THE END

(for now)

(A/N: OK, I lied. This is the last chapter. But it's a good one, isn't it? Clearing everything up, and such? And yes, there WILL be another story! "Dealing with Danger" will be posted when I can't stand having it inside my head anymore, which could be any time from tomorrow to three weeks from now. So no, I don't know when it will be going up, so you don't have to ask.

I might well work on Roman a Clef in between times. Or I might not. I do start school on Thursday. (I know, that never stopped me before.) But I'm likely to be really busy this semester. So I don't know how often I'll be updating. Once a week at least, I hope. But we'll see. Please do send me all the review love you can! I'm going to need it!)